GOLDEN TIME

4

ゴールデンタイム

裏腹なるdont look back

竹宮ゆゆこ
イラスト●駒都えーじ

電撃文庫

ゴールデンタイム

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イラスト●駒都えーじ

デザイン●ビィビィ

CAST

多田万里 …… 主人公。上京してきた大学一年生。

加賀香子 …… お嬢様。超完璧。
いや、ほぼ完璧。だいたい完璧。……多分完璧。

柳澤光央 …… 万里の友達。通称やなっさん。

林田奈々 …… 二年の先輩。通称リンダ。

岡千波 …… ほっこりラブリーな森ガール。XSサイズ。

二次元くん …… 二次元に絶望した男。本名佐藤。

NANA先輩 …… 謎の先輩（コスプレではないらしい）。

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Kouto's Style of Nursing

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Golden Time

Volume 4

~don't look back~

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Prologue

Since that Wednesday, ten days had passed.

Two hundred and forty hours.

Had he noticed the way time was passing, it was already the second Friday since then. As Banri headed to the staff room, his sports bag slung over his uniformed shoulder, a soundless chill ran up his back.

The school building in midwinter, past 7pm, was quietly getting dark and chilly. The other students were already gone from sight. All the lights had been turned off except for the staff-room, and walking alone in the corridor his slippered feet were illuminated by the green emergency lights.

In time with Banri's steps, the clubroom keys in his hand jingled. Of green and of yellow, it seemed that when the two plastic tags hit each other they made a noise. It was such a little sound, he had not noticed it before.

Accounting for and inspecting the equipment after club activities, being in charge of returning the clubroom keys to the staffroom after everybody had left, was what in the running club was called being the "Last Act", and the second years had come to take turns in doing it. Up to now Banri had done it many times, but it was perhaps the first time he'd done it by himself.

Perhaps, or rather, for sure. It was the first time.

Banri's feet stopped for a moment. Until now, Linda had gone with him every time. When it was Banri's turn to be Last Act, Linda had come with him.

It had already been ten days since then. So many days had passed because he had come to ignore Linda.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the week opening, Monday, Tuesday, a second Wednesday, with Thursday, and then today Friday--- counting them inside his head as if to make sure, once more his feet moved. When he stepped forward, he grabbed the strap to his slipping bag, putting it back in place with a grunt. It would be like this from now on, he'd decided. ...Thinking about it over and over, as if convincing himself, was strangely upsetting.

Telling himself he would not feel anything, Banri firmly sealed his slightly chapped lips. Staying disinterested, silent, he would do as he had decided. Alone, resolute, he lifted his eyes.

He would never, not another time, say another word to Linda. He would not be concerned with

Hayashida Nana.

The staff-room door opened at his soft knock and he went inside.

To Banri, who had been walking alone in the cold dark corridor, the flourescent lighting in the room was too bright. It dazzled his eyes. And the heat was working too hard, which made the air too dry. While blinking over and over, he hung the keys up on the wall right next to where he entered.

"Excuse mee, I'm back from the running cluub. Thank you very muuch."

Dipping his head in the direction of an apathetic teacher's voice, without skipping a beat he made his exit as if he were being drawn from behind and closed the door.

And then again, the chilly, dark, silent corridor. The world of mid-winter.

Today's Last Act mission was with that completed.

Again alone in the corridor, Banri took a small breath without realizing it. He wrapped a wool muffler around his neck up to his mouth like a girl, and tied it behind his neck.

Even if Shizuoka was a relatively warm place, it was February.

Outside the sun had set a while ago, and it was probably appropriately cold. When he looked at the window pane, he saw from the raindrops sticking to it one after another, as if drawing sharp diagonal lines, that at some point it had even started to rain. With a thirty-percent chance of rain having been predicted, he had brought along a folding umbrella.

Continuing down the dark stairwell to the entrance, Banri descended carefully so as not to stumble. To the landing still as death, only the sound of the rubber soles of his hallway slippers on the metal step edges, clip, clap, echoing strangely clearly.

That Wednesday's Last Act was Linda. ...He wondered if Linda too had heard such a ridiculous sound at a time like this. At least his ears were completely covered up against the echoes.

---I am not in love with Banri!

"..."

Shouted by Linda, such were the echoing words.

Though he didn't want to remember them, they came back to mind once more, of course. Casting his eyes downward, when he reached out to grab the handrail his fingertip was suddenly zapped by static electricity. Surprised by the pain, Banri lifted his hand from the cold metal. What the? He muttered to himself sullenly. Sulking, he stuffed both his cold hands deep into his pockets.

What the heck, really.

What the, what the heck.

Since that day, that was all Banri thought about. What, what the heck. It continued to weigh on him, and in a deep funk, between the many careless comments, and people acting the fool even, he was gradually forgetting how to go with the flow.

Wednesday of last week, Banri was waiting by the stairwell for Linda to come out bringing the room key as the Last Act.

However Linda was still there, perhaps chatting merrily with the other girls, not getting a move on at all. So Banri, growing impatient, thought he would return to the room and call for her to get moving.

Once he stood before the thin door, he could clearly hear the high-pitched laughing voices of the girls on the other side, and mixed amongst them was Linda's voice too, shouting "How has it come to this!?"

Saying "of course not," while half-amazed, he took hold of the door knob, ready to turn it, and,

"Eh, you're kidding! Are we wrong!?"

"But all of us thought that Linda-senpai and Banri-senpai were dating!"

He became unable to move.

Banri, stood there alone, even stupidly, paralyzed, his eyes wide as if he'd just been given an electric shock. The voices just now were of the first-year girls, he thought. But, what the? What in the world were they suddenly talking about?

Though he had no intention to eavesdrop, he could hear everything from the very start, the thin door providing no soundproofing effect at all. To Banri's ears, the girls' conversation... was what you'd call 'girl talk', and for guys, that just goes straight in one ear and out the other.

Shouldn't a guy get a move on? Still bewildered, he thought so in a moment of honesty, but,

"Well I thought so, or rather I 'think' so! Why have you been hiding it~!?"

"Really, really. You guys have been super close, you look like the perfect couple, and you're always the most magnificent. Doesn't it look like you're having fun hanging around together!? So there's just no way you wouldn't be dating!"

Banri was still in the same poze, door-knob in hand and about to turn it, but he still could not move.

He wanted to answer back, "...It just isn't like that! It couldn't be more impossible!" but he couldn't gather the voice to say it, standing there bolt upright, gasping in vain.

They thought that he and Linda were dating.

It was quite a shock.

But that sort of thing. Linda and himself dating. This me, and that Linda. Being seen as a couple. To Banri it was something truly unexpected.

For sure, he and Linda were pretty close. They got along strangely well. Their sense of humor going off randomly, the fun they had when they were together, and the conversation and the mood too, it was as if they responded to each other. Constantly looking after each other without reservations, it was cozy being with Linda. And so whether it was in the classroom, the clubroom, wherever or whenever, the very first thing Banri did was look for Linda.

But, he thought that was as far as it went.

That is, of course, Linda was of the opposite sex. He knew that. She's a girl. He understood that. She wasn't the same as his male buddies. Her long hair was silky, her white skin was smooth too, and the way she ran was beautiful. He had even wanted to stare in silence at her eyes, wrinkled with laughter. At her mouth too. Especially the area around where her skin meets her lips. Linda's lips, by their light pink color, indeed, by looking soft, they looked altogether different from my own. He had even imagined what they would be like if he were to touch them. The other guys had not once, not for one second thought of such things.

But, because of that... because, of that.

...That?

Trying to think, Banri held his breath.

All the reasons he wasn't ever likely to date Linda, and that it was unlikely from the start, now that he'd said them, they were nowhere to be found.

Because they got along the way they did, and were really close, it wasn't particularly odd it had come to this.

In fact, from near at hand that was what it looked like.

Linda is pretty and...

"Wha...!?"

At the moment he suddenly became aware of possibilities he had not realized existed until now, Banri's cheeks suddenly blushed furiously.

If he could've seen it, they'd turned into bright red balls of fire. Suddenly he was hot around his eyelids too. It seemed his eyelashes were burning up. Attacked by a ferocious turmoil of uncertain meaning, Banri held the door knob as if clinging to it, holding up his body which was starting to shake. All of a sudden, the ground swayed to match the way his heart had started beating like crazy. He realized that his brain seemed to be boiling.

Unable to understand, squeezing his eyes shut without thinking,

"Cut! It! Out! What are you guys!? Are you idiots!?"

He heard Linda's voice.

It was as if his entire body had become an ear. No, rather, he was a human parabolic antenna. All of his body given the ability to receive, he directed himself towards Linda through the the door separating them.

Aware that he was becoming desperate, Banri asked himself, "Can this be real?"

He had suddenly become like this by simply being made aware. It seemed to him as if Linda's smile was floating in his mind, its brightness blurring slightly, as if it were melting. What a simple person I am.

"But Banri and I aren't like that! We get along, or rather, somehow it's come to be that I look out for him! Look, Banri isn't reliable, or rather, he doesn't act like a man! So you could say I just can't leave him alone!"

"Ah yes, ah yes..." they said, in a tone of voice as if they were teasing their respected senpai Linda, some of the girls joining together in a falsetto.

"Now, I, get, it. You're saying you can't leave Banri-senpai alone because you like him!"

It seemed to him the temperature in his brain had risen to its limits.

Banri had already forgotten even to breathe. His heart was pumping his blood like crazy, beating strangely fast and at great pressure. Linda liking him, wow.

There was no way, no way it could be...

"You're wrong! For one thing, I don't even see that guy as a man! In other words, it's not like that!"

"..."

Banri opened his tightly closed eyes wide.

He said "What?" but there were so many stupid voices spilling out at once that in spite of the

noise he made, they still hadn't noticed his presence.

Linda's voice, her words, he had heard them clearly of course. With their meaning and their intent precise,

"I don't like him!"

---This time, cool oxygen suddenly penetrated deep into his brain cells.

What his open eyes were seeing, even he did not understand. For a moment, Banri even forgot where he was.

Standing alone, it suddenly felt like he'd been thrown up into the air.

As if it were impossible to resist, he was suddenly grabbed as if by an eagle's talons and flung high with all its strength. And then,

"There we are again! You're just shy, don't you really like him?"

"No way, you've got it wrong! I ne-ver liked that guy!"

And then only the fall to earth is left... so they say.

Would it be said that without a safety net, he would have struck so hard he would die and the crash site be impossible to discover?

"Your blood rose all at once to your head, but now it's falling back down to your feet just as fast. I think you're going a little pale."

"I don't love Banri at all!"

The door-knob was warm.

No.

The fingers grabbing it, they were too cold.

What the, what the heck.

He felt it suddenly quiet down inside his chest. ...What the, what the heck. What the heck was he doing? That, he wasn't. By himself, flying high to suit himself. Violently up and down. Taking a nose-dive, unable to keep from making noise. And even now, he couldn't move.

It wasn't even for a few seconds, but how'd you like my foolishness in soaring lightly, high in the air? The simplicity of it. Acting like it was one big misunderstanding. One giant misunderstanding. He was ashamed of everything, and accursed. He could not help but be

detestable. Too indecent even to look at. An overly showy exercise in futility. A sharp, stabbing pain.

Banri, without realizing it, bit his lip firmly and raised his face. Squaring his uniformed shoulder, he took a breath, in and out. His parents' expectations were excessive. In all the time since he entered high school, Banri's build hadn't gotten any bigger. Well, he was still growing. Though it may not look like it, he was taller than he was last year.

Besides, in particular. It is.

Such things.

But this.

He didn't like things like this with Linda.

He understood how she might not want to say she didn't like him, or other such things, directly.

It was just,

"...Unreliable, unmanly, difficult to watch out for..."

He was muttering to himself as if he were spitting out the words, and the door to the room was suddenly opened from the inside, almost at the same instant. When the first-year girls spotted Banri standing there, they gasped.

Inside the room there were three first-year girls, and Linda.

He didn't see Linda's face.

Banri turned on his heel at once and stalked off, as if leaving behind the understandably awkward silence.

Not looking back even once, not running, changing his shoes at the shoe-rack, he left the school.

In the time it took him to reach the first traffic light, he had to tell himself to stop saying "Linda" twice already. Stop worrying about her. So he decided.

If she doesn't like me, I'll be fine. He wondered if as things were it would become a non-relationship anyway, with Linda not caring at all. He wondered if she'd even think about him at all. If it turned out that way, that was fine. Forgotten entirely, made into something that never was. Even here, he did not want to beg a person who did not like him to stay on good terms with him.

As things were, he was irritated, because she was embarassed of his being by her side, not guessing what he might think of her, without even doubting, making that face as if it were her

natural right.

So Banri thought. It was unexpectedly clownish. For more than two years, Linda, while acting all friendly on the surface, when she saw him was deep inside thinking he was a guy she didn't like.

(As for the precious time you've spent keeping an eye on me even though you didn't like me, I'm very sorry for having been a problem for you! Please, from now on, spend the time of your life on the guy you love!)

---Shaking it all off and leaving it all behind, Banri broke into a run on the way home, as if he were escaping. Banri's view of the world had gone blank, as if somebody had painted it over in white.

It had been like that for ten days now.

Linda, over the past ten days had tried to call out to him cheerfully "Yo Banri!", tried to call out to him softly "Hey, Banri...", tried to call out to him indirectly "Want some candy?", tried to call out to him directly "About what happened the other day...", tried to call out to him by e-mail "Good effort at today's club activity☆" and even tried to use her brother like a caveman messenger sent from the jungle to call out to him "Uvoi! How ya been!? Whatcha doing!? Oh, wanna banana!?" At any rate, she freely used all sorts of methods to try and establish communications with Banri.

Banri ignored them all.

The reason being that he had decided to not have anything to do with her anymore.

"...Ugh. They're cold, of course...!"

Pulling on his loafers for the walk home, Banri having completed today's Last Act alone, he left through the deserted students' entrance.

Just then, blown against his face by a cold winter wind from the north, the freezing raindrops made him gasp.

He opened his cheap, but better than nothing, and in fact entirely sufficient folding umbrella with a flapping noise. It happened when he had descended the three steps and was turning towards the school gate.

The wind was blowing the rain under the eaves to the side of the entrance steps.

Standing alone in the icy darkness, no umbrella to be seen, in a dark green duffle coat like a blackboard.

As if lighting faintly the night darkness, a snow white face.

"..."

"..."

Standing up upon seeing Banri, Linda opened her mouth as if struggling to do so, but in the end she didn't say anything. Banri didn't say anything either.

Still without a word, several seconds passed. The two which had been friends until ten days earlier both looked down at their feet.

The one who moved forward was Banri.

Hiding the face halfway inside his dark blue umbrella, not wanting her to realize that he had stopped, he stepped out again forcefully. He passed by Linda's side. Leaving her behind, he continued forward. He had decided to not look back.

However, a small voice called Banri's name.

Perhaps due to the winter, Linda's voice seemed to be shaking as if overstressed.

Banri's feet stopped.

...Did she not have an umbrella?

Still not turning around, in the night amidst the sparkling drops of rain-water, he heard Linda's breathing behind him.

He wondered how long she had been there. He wondered if by chance she had been waiting for him. In such a cold place, by herself. ---For the sake of a guy she didn't like, why?

Would she like an umbrella?

Banri looked at the folding umbrella whose handle was grasped tightly in his hand. He thought there was no way Linda would come beneath this umbrella like a friend.

But, if she would, she could. Even for an unrelated person, even that much kindness should be okay.

There, a troubled, unfamiliar girl, one not associated with him, not liking nor hating him, not a friend nor even an acquaintance, standing in the cold mid-winter rain. In such a case, there were reasons to be kind, Banri thought.

But still not of a mind to say anything at all, Banri turned around. Once he handed over the umbrella, he intended to run away at once.

Her hair wet from the rain, Linda looked at Banri. She had been watching the whole time. Her

two dark eyes, quietly, weakly glittering, were just like twinkling raindrops in the night. Slowly, as if he were slowly beginning to dissolve, Banri involuntarily forgot to breathe.

But, before long.

Slowly, her lips started to move,

Chapter 1

1

(Linda...)

"...ngh..."

In the middle of his futon, Banri opened his eyes.

Linda, he'd said.

Almost in shock, he gradually felt around his cheeks the heat of a long sigh he let out.

Was what he was seeing a dream?

The warm remnants had dripped from the core of his body into the pit of his stomach, but the aftertaste of calling out to her was simply too vivid. His heart was still beating hard.

The towel-blanket that covered him to his head was damp from his night sweat. In the thin darkness, suffused with his own body odor, he realized that he was curled up and dug deep under like an animal in a deep burrow.

As if he were twisting himself, he stuck his head out and at the same time, his cell-phone's alarm sounded beside his bed. It was morning.

The world before his eyes: his familiar one room apartment.

His own room for living alone. The interior, an idiotic beige and white, wood-tone.

As he did it, Banri thought 'what an awful mess.' Not having arisen from his bed yet, only his eyes were moving. Where there would be a television screen, there was a still open notebook computer, half-empty PET bottles and snack-food bags. And disposable chopsticks. Not wanting to get his hands dirty, Banri eats potato chips with chopsticks. And because washing the chopsticks for the sake of the potato chips was bothersome, he was using those disposable chopsticks they have set by the cash register at the convenience store for the benefit of people buying boxed lunches, by the sign saying "Please use chopsticks!" Up to this point, he had never turned them down.

Everything he couldn't tidy up was scattered aimlessly around the center cushion: a charger, gum, some bags, a wallet, comics, discarded socks, nose-blown tissues, finger wiped tissues, tissues dirtied somehow at the formation of the galaxy, and in another alternate universe were discarded clothes, lecture handouts, loose-leaf papers, and miscellaneous things stuffed in through the mail-slot.

And stretched across the floor, a parallelogram.

It was the shadow of a stool.

In the north and south, through the gaps in the yellow curtains the morning light shone through, cutting straight lines, and in them the dust in the air could be seen drifting, dancing in the beams. He thought: it’s the world of morning. The sunlight was brilliant. It looked like today’s weather would be good again.

It was already time when he had to get up and go to first period.

But, far from getting himself up, he could not, so long as he could stop the cell-phone alarm. Banri remained lying down still, his chest moving up and down with his shallow breathing.

His outstretched arms felt heavy, his legs had no strength, and he was unable to throw off his towel-blanket. The back of his head buried in the pillow still, he kept looking up vaguely at the ceiling.

The morning light on the other side of his eyelashes was dazzling. Frowning with eyebrows unkempt since the trim he’d received the previous month, Banri resisted still the shrill sound of the alarm.

In Tokyo, July had arrived.

Three months had passed already since he’d come up to Tokyo.

The stickiness of his skin was surely due to the heat of the night.

Still laying down in the bed soaked with his body heat and sweat, Banri pressed the back of his hand against his forehead. His forehead was hot and sticky, and where he touched his body felt bad.

He wondered what the heck happened overnight, where he’d gone.

Was that all--- a dream?

Blinking his eyes in the warmly humid summer morning, Banri somehow raised his bangs from where they had stuck to his forehead. He simply didn't think that it was all a dream. That was just no way, he felt.

As proof that it was not a dream, his lips throbbed painfully in time with his heartbeat. With the terrible heat and swelling, he could not close his mouth very tightly. With all due respect, one thing is Ikariya, another Matsumoto Seichou, otherwise, lips as huge as this are considered to be pretty in a tribal environment... but no, already it didn't matter. At any rate, even he understood that the swelling was obvious.

Last night, Banri had fallen flat on his face in the middle of his room.

He'd cut his lip banging his mouth on the floor pretty hard. It bled terribly, but still, he was lucky his front teeth weren't broken, and he had to believe it was the way he fell.

While trembling in pain and shock, he couldn't do more in any case than press hard on the cut with a tissue. The bleeding had dripped all the way down to his chin, but he had a feeling that rushing over to the hospital emergency room would be a bit much, and wavering over what to do, he entered once more into a sleep-like trance... it seemed like.

There were traces of blood here and there on the towel spread out over his pillow. And on the sheets. And on the front of his tee-shirt. And on the tissues scattered about also, there was the color of dried blood.

And then,

'Linda!'

"...ngh..."

---Like a high-pitched scream, the cell-phone alarm was still sounding.

Crying and shouting like some invisible person, the sound was incredibly hurtful to his ears.

With all his might, Banri shut his eyes. It somehow seemed awfully difficult to grab the cell-phone with his right hand and kill the alarm. As things were, he got out of bed as if he were rolling out of it.

But on the wooden flooring, no strength in his knees, his body folded like an old man's, just like that. He couldn't straighten himself up. He didn't have the strength to support himself.

Crouched on the floor on his hands and knees, in a poze as if he were bowed down in worship, covering his face with hands that had dropped his cell-phone,

"...Why, like this..."

He moaned.

And then, like that, a flash-back--- that was the only thing you could call it, he was enduring a great wave of explosive feelings.

What was happening to him now? What had happened during the night? He didn't understand it precisely. Banri simply understood that last night, temporarily, his past self had awoken in his body.

A few hours ago, in the middle of the night, the Tada Banri from before his memory loss had suddenly and surely woken from sleep and was here in this body.

He remembered it being like a fish jumping out of the water, thinking "Aah! I'm returning! To my body!" Who had thought that, or seeing as the core personality was clearly no longer there, that it was this body, or rather this body that thought like that was something he could only

barely comprehend.

It was every emotion coming at him at once: surprise and delight, bewilderment, bafflement and dismay. They were all one thing.

'I want to go back to be with Linda!'

That was all Tada Banri asked.

Mother didn't matter, father didn't matter, home didn't matter. In that time a bit ago when Banri tried with all his might to run off and return home, it was about one woman only.

That woman, formally called Hayashida Nana but answering to 'Linda', of supple build, was formerly his female friend, and was now his club senior, and now, because of that, with that,

"...ng, ...ng"

With that.

---Every gasp was as if his heart were being grabbed and squeezed.

He wondered what kind of mechanism it was.

Cowering down still, his body twisting, Banri tried repeatedly to somehow get a good breath. He attempted to calm himself down and return to himself, to breathe slowly in and let it out. But his lungs and stomach stiffened as if he were shivering, his chest squeezed in tightly as if it were scared of something, and he couldn't get them to work together. Half in a state of panic, on the verge of suffocating and yet on the edge of hyperventilating too, Banri shook his diaphragm awkwardly and rubbed his forehead against the floor.

He was thinking, wishing to escape from reality, and that he seemed to be quite the 'keening woman.' He'd seen from the television that it was the custom somewhere in Asia. It was said they would go crazy at funerals, wailing exaggeratedly on purpose, in the so-called 'Sakura' form. While watching the professional women do their work, screaming and bawling in a virtually trance-like state, Banri had been thinking "If I tried that, I'd probably do it backwards." He was surely in such a state now, making his back go up and down violently. Like he was being hit squarely by hypersonic waves, every cell of his body was on the verge of destruction from the ferocity by which they were being made to vibrate.

Already, he was entirely mush.

He thought of his normal shape.

He had known for quite a while now that the person he was before he lost his memories had had a crush on Linda.

Just by looking at the smiling face next to Linda in the photo, that was of course the proof, himself. He told himself, that guy is in love. You're entirely exposed, you, I mean me.

And now Banri, meeting Linda-senpai once more, having become a college student, without even knowing the full situation, from the start felt her worth caring about ...no, he thought she was rather nice. As much on the outside as on the inside, and when later it became clear, as he learned more of the past, he was already thankful, from the bottom of his heart, for her support in his very existence, and as far as Banri was concerned, Linda had been a "special person" for a long time already.

If he had not met and fallen in love with Kaga Kouko, it wouldn't be strange if he were going crazy with a second crush on Linda by now.

He even knew that was how he would have thought.

But, that was all.

Even so.

For no more than one night, or rather for a few moments, no, maybe just for a few seconds, his former self, from before he lost his memories, had returned to his body.

It was definitely a situation where the feelings when he started running for Linda's side, the strong attachment he must have had, built over a long time and many shared experiences, had been installed into his current self.

In the heart of the present Banri welcoming the morning, the forcefully spoken words "I want to go back!" torn out of his body as if in reckless yearning remained entirely there, though his memories had not returned.

Truly, he wanted to say 'What the heck?' He wanted to ask somebody.

In just one night, this much of his heart had been stolen away.

(I wonder what Linda is doing right now?) (Would she be thinking of me?) (What does Linda think of me, I wonder?) (Just what am I as far as Linda is concerned?)

---Really, he felt like he had been stolen away.

He was becoming unable to think of anything normally, of other things. Surprisingly, the core of his thoughts had turned to mush. Separately, Banri thought of his own problems. Though he'd never been the type to call himself sharp-witted, all things considered, his current situation was really bad.

Looking rather like a cat sitting atop a fence, he raised his stunned face in both hands. He did not understand the meaning. He realized that when Linda had been here, he had been hoping

without any reason for it. He truly did not understand the meaning of it.

Looking at the stools, he thought. It would be nice if Linda were sitting over there. Looking at the kitchen, he thought. It would be nice if she were there in the kitchen. He looked at the window and thought. It would be nice if she were there by the window. Here, at my side, it would be nice if Linda were here now. And then, even this pain, this empty heart, would all be resolved.

What was he saying...

All he needed to pierce himself was sharpness, but he was too blunt. Just hitting himself viciously with the back of a heavy kitchen knife hurt, but it didn't cut!

...He would not deceive himself, not even in jest. It was like his self was being washed away.

He was in over his head, all his thoughts, his emotions, even his very self were becoming a rushing torrent, forming a whirlpool that swirled around a single woman called Linda. Whatever he did, he couldn't break out of this whirlpool. Not even breathing, trying to fight back, he had so far been unable to return to normal movement. Crammed and filled to bursting, like a balloon inflated to its limits, he was at the end of his rope, and couldn't stretch the least bit more.

He was doing really well with ordinary difficulties. He remembered the face of his former self. Even so, the troubles of the former Tada Banri, everything: his studies, sitting for exams, taking part in club activities, hanging around with his other friends, all while a state of being afflicted by emotions for one woman, were something hidden from him.

(...I flunked my exams because of such things...)

He was talking to himself like it was somebody else's problem, but even so, he thought that the face in the photo, laughing to where you could see the teeth in the back of his mouth, was clearly feeling good about things.

(Or rather...)

The photo.

All of a sudden, there was a chill up his spine.

Of course, he could not set aside the matter. He realized that he didn't know where the photo taken of his face with Linda's was. For certain, it had disappeared from the place where it should have been, and given the circumstances, he could only think ‘somebody' had found it and taken it away.

And that 'somebody', should it turn out to be ‘girlfriend'...

"...Ah, ah, ah...! Enough already!"

'Horrible, horrible, horrible, I'm horrible, I'm the worst, I should die, or rather not think, or at least think properly,' Banri moaned as if in prayer, churned his hair with his hands and bounced up and down energetically.

For the moment, the world was a giant slalom. Raising his voice stupidly, "Eh!?" unable to stand, he sank to the ground once more, just like Bambi.

His vision kept spinning, as if he'd been riding on a merry-go-round. And then, though he had intended to sit straight down, of its own accord his body was rapidly listing to one side. Had he realized it, it was as if he had motion sickness, with nausea welling up from his stomach.

He was in awful shape.

Frowning silently, Banri sat foppishly, sideways with both hands on the floor, supporting a body that seemed to have collapsed. Was his bad condition due to the wound on his lip, which had been throbbing in pain the whole time? Could it be as bad as that? He considered going to the bathroom to check in mirror and see how bad his face looked, but without strength in his limbs, of course, he could neither stand up nor walk.

Frustrated, Banri shuffled, almost crawled, over to the low table in the center of the room on his knees. He remembered the gorgeous mirror that Kouko had given him. Taking hold of it desperately, clinging to it like he was drowning, he checked his face.

Described within the mirror,

"Oooh...!?"

A cursed, ugly face was revealed.

What the... he gasped in silence for a moment. It felt like he was that lout they called "Porco Rosso."

His first impression of the wound on his lip was that it was worse than he'd ever imagined. His entire lower lip was swollen like an over-ripe field berry... it looked something like a snake gourd. His lip must have split along a line in the shape of a letter 'Y'. Streaked vividly with dark dried blood, fresh enough to make one want to look away, they had swollen up hugely. The area which had gotten bashed was bruised deep purple. You could call it elegant, but such elegance in the old days was only permitted to the emperor--- stop it, I don't have the heart to joke about it right now.

The swelling that he wanted to avert his eyes from stretched from around his chin to his cheeks, all the way to around eyes. Banri's face was swollen to five times larger than normal.

His eyes shut just like some insolent newborn baby, his sweaty, slippery skin gleaming strangely, breathing through his nose while letting his lips droop carelessly, not wanting to admit that this was his own face, and it would be reborn seven more times yet, he had been thrown a perfectly

straight, plain fast ball. Catching it was going to be a pain.

And his face was not its normal color. Flushed red and swollen up, if he tried to hold his hand against his cheek or his forehead they were hot, as if they had caught fire. Come to think of it, wasn't it too hot where he just touched his forehead?

"In other words... do I have a fever?"

The dizziness, the feeling out of sorts, and now a feverish face. He didn't have a thermometer to check it with, but his current state was proof enough.

When he had calmed himself down and checked how he felt, more than the heat of a July morning, he felt a chill seeping out from the marrow of his bones. Now he was shivering.

Banri, somehow propping up his body against the wall, staggered towards the bathroom for now. He managed to take care of that, sitting down as if collapsing, but when it came time to leave it was on all fours. Like this, if his hair were long, he'd be just like Sadako.

Quickly falling to the floor once again, unable to get up and by will-power alone pulling his pants on about 70% of the way, he thought. This was, perhaps, really, a bit too much in a physical sense. He wasn't going to be able to get better by himself. He had a feeling that as time went on he was only going to get worse.

There certainly had to be a clinic specializing in internal medicine in the neighborhood. He remembered spotting one while walking about.

Getting up somehow or another, he finished pulling on the remaining 30% of his pants. Grabbing his wallet (insurance card inside), his cell-phone and the house-key, and pulling some house-shorts near at hand over the lower half of his body, Banri headed unsteadily towards the door.

Stuffing his wobbly feet into sandals and opening the door, he went out into the outer corridor. The direct sunlight dazzled his eyes. The door lock didn't want to set, and he struck the door knob over and over again with the keys, to no avail. Almost seating himself there, he managed to set the lock after several tries. Starting to walk off,

"...Aaa..."

Dizzyness. It was useless, of course. The world was once more a merry-go-round.

He fell to the side as if he'd had his feet kicked out from under him, hitting the next door rather hard. He sank down to the floor, unable to get back on his feet just then.

The next apartment, come to think of it, wasn't that of a stranger. Banri hit that door over and over again with his feeble fists.

Shortly, the sound of stamping feet came to Banri's ears through the door, their owner making

no attempt at concealing her displeasure. The angrily opened door was stopped only by the fallen Banri's head.

"Y're noisy!"

Her voice was low and rough, reverberating as if from the depths of hell, but,

"...Ah?"

She seemed to realize right away that the pitiful creature fallen at her doorstep was her underclassman neighbor.

In Banri's barely open eyes, whether by chance or not, there was a perfect view, looking up at an angle from below at the figure standing there imposingly in the door.

He was absolutely not looking over that too-white skin with his gaze, over and over, up and down, as if he were licking her all over. He was feeling so sick that even if he had thought of it, he wouldn't have been able to control the movement of his eyeballs.

Over her slim body, she wore a oversize black skull and crossbones tee-shirt. Her bare toenails were painted jet black too. As much as she was sinister, there were those white thighs, boyishly firm shins and ankles. Shell-like ankle-bones. If he looked at upwards once more, it was likewise black... she was somehow wearing boxer shorts like a guy.

He wondered if he would be trampled to death, without hesitation, if he were to say something like "Wasn't there a thong hanging on the veranda when I looked the other day? Why isn't it there?" Because he understood that much, Banri turned his head limply to the side, averting his eyes from the panties.

Irritated, her scowling eyebrows were punkishly thin. Without makeup, her features were like those of a beautiful child. The jet black hair that fell to around her chin seemed strangely devoid of life. She didn't seem womanly, her body too small and thin.

Holding a cigarette pinched in her fingertips, she silently inhaled a mouthful. You could hear the little flame burning. As if she wanted her lungs to be soaked in nicotine, keeping her thin lips closed for a bit, not breathing, NANA-senpai was looking down at Banri.

Presently, smoke leaked out from her mouth.

"What are you doing?"

"...I am, in distress..."

In the rain! A failure! An abandoned dog! It seemed like that kind of situation.

"NANA-senpai...?"

Banri looked up at the person beside him, filled with many thoughts and feelings.

"You seriously, really are a super nice person! ...You were, weren't you!?"

"Your face is really ticking me off."

That voice was so ill-tempered, it could have continued "You want me to give you a *bindi* by cigarette burn?"

Whether it was due to her bad temper, smoking, her band or all of the above, the low, rough quality of NANA-senpai's voice, for no apparent reason, was easy on his ears. Perhaps his sense of hearing was overheating, but it seemed to Banri to belong in the same category as sonar echoing in the deeps of the sea.

NANA-senpai grabbed hold of Banri's elbow firmly and helped lift his wobbly body. She was also holding a plastic bag from the pharmacy with antibiotics prescribed for him, so he wouldn't drop it.

If you saw them up close, they were perhaps a little... no, a very suspicious looking twosome. A very ill-tempered punk woman with a pallid face and a really ugly looking guy (with a big bandage on this mouth) with feverishly glittering eyes. But from an outsider's perspective, under the clear, pleasant morning sky, they were simply walking companionably arm in arm.

The sidewalk of dull red and grey pavers combined into a checkerboard pattern relayed them on from the clinic to the combined station and shopping district, and continued onwards to the apartment building where Banri and NANA-senpai lived. A row of ginkgo trees leafed out thickly, casting dark lacy shadows about their feet.

He looked at his watch when they left the pharmacy, and it was barely nine thirty, but the sunlight coming down from above was already baking their skin. The voices of the cicadas could not be heard yet. But, he had a feeling that in this hot wind, they'd turn the volume up really loud any time now.

Moving his uncomfortable mouth carefully, Banri,

"Really, thank you very much... it seems that I misunderstood you somehow, NANA-senpai..."

Looking up at NANA-senpai, he tried earnestly to convey his gratitude.

If he were to stand straight up, Banri would actually be about ten centimeters taller, but in his current weak-legged state, Banri's nose came up to around NANA-senpai's shoulder.

The reply was one chilly snort. Without so much as a twitch of her narrow chin for Banri's sake, perhaps wanting a cigarette, she licked her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"NANA-senpai, in the wilderness of Tokyo, putting up a brave front so as not to be underestimated, truly having forgotten entirely the kind and gentle ways of neighborly love, not even accepting the Unagi-pie my mother and I had bought, just somebody from Kawaguchi, changed by the city into an extreme cosplayer..."

She may not have had the black makeup around her eyes, but her gaze was sufficiently sharp and cold as she glared back at Banri, irritated.

"I'm not from Kawaguchi! And I'm not a cosplayer."

"Ah, excuse me... but, err, or was it Kami-Nakazato?"

She growled "Wa-ra-bi," altogether like a wild animal in a cage.

But still. What to do in this odd situation?

NANA-senpai, the one that knocked down Banri and Kouko with a guitar once, the one that had that trendy, very loud poetry reading spot (though he wasn't really sure of that). And the one that took Banri is his shaky condition to the clinic. He wondered who in the world could have imagined this scene.

At the very least, it was one amazing moment, both surprising and moving. He had thought he only wanted to get some help in standing up, but he truly not expected to receive so much.

The clinic was smaller than he'd thought, and barely five minutes distance from the apartments where they lived, but though he was made to wait quite a while, it took time to check and treat him, and it even took time to get his medicine from a nearby pharmacy, NANA-senpai accompanied him all the while without a cigarette. Even beyond that: when he didn't have quite enough to pay the bill, she even lent him some money.

Because he had had the impression of this person as really scary, and terribly dangerous, somebody who shouldn't be expected to be nice to him, it had moved him all the more. It rather felt like he was a mangy stray dog out in the rain who had been randomly helped by somebody.

"...I will not forget my debt to you, my whole life long!"

Neither will I forget she's from Warabi, Banri thought of the greater Tokyo and northeastern Japan roadmap while reflecting deeply.

"Shut up. Look here, don't stagger. Walk straight, pig-face."

Still wearing a black night-shirt, worn out and torn in several places, and tired jersey pants, her flip-flops flapping, NANA-senpai put her hand underneath his arm and,

"Ugh, it's all wet! ...It's arm-pit sweat!"

As if in complete revulsion, she twisted her pallid, unhealthy-looking face. Heh, Banri laughed,

"It's arm-pit sweat!"

For a guy with a fever, he was strangely tense. Making his eyes glisten like a newborn babe's, while looking up at the 'truly gentle delinquent.' Shamelessly sticking and cuddling up to her, perhaps thinking about such extraneous things like 'the substance referred to as a bra isn't really needed in this human life.'

"Hey, what's with you!"

"It's arm-pit sweat!"

"No its not! It was a sign they were telling us about!"

"That it looks like my lip wound is starting to fester, and I'm getting feverish."

"...Hmm. That's what it looks like. Well, at a glance it looks awfully bad. ...Perhaps you got hit?"

"Huh? Indeed. Me, me. It's from me to me."

"Shut up and be quiet."

"Watcha gonna, do..."

"Shut up and be quiet, or I'm gonna kill you."

"Ma-n, NANA-senpai... you're so stand-offish, or should I say smoky..."

Being lent a shoulder was a nice thing. As it was, Banri, caught up in the moment, seeing the bones across her tee-shirt getting sharper, tried to push his nose into her slender shoulder.

"...And besides, wow, being watched really close under the eyes of NANA-senpai, the awful bear...eek!"

There being no use arguing, she grabbed a handful of hair on the top of his head as if it were a bundle of straw and tore it off. But isn't that the way it is? It was already too late to be thinking he'd gotten carried away with things. The rising screech from the pain in his scalp twisting his still painful mouth, Banri was at NANA-senpai's mercy, unable to make a sound. And in that way, without a shoulder being lent to him a second time, he was hauled back by a silent NANA-senpai, by the hair of his head, and arrived back to the apartments.

"Look, just stand up."

Tossed towards the entrance as if he were flung, shoved into the elevator and then leaving it,

"Go."

Just one word. Then like a condemned criminal from a time before human rights might be simply thrown off a cliff, he was kicked in the butt by a sandal. Not the most surefooted even at the best of times, Banri fell over easily, and,

"Are, aren't you being rather mean!? Treating the injured me like this... just when I thought you are really nice, you're suddenly cold... huh!? It must be that so-called 'tsunderation', where you're prepared mentally by being dragged around by the nose..."

"Shut up."

"...Though if it were Linda-senpai, then she'd certainly be kind to me...!"

"That'd be nice, wouldn't it? Linda, catch!"

Grabbed by the back of the neck, he was once more pushed away. Stumbling forward and clinging to the corridor wall,

"Oh... My..."

That person, was there.

Feeling like he was halfway through a test of spirit, the name belonging to that person...

"...Ngh..."

Not saying anything more, not even a greeting for the moment, Banri only dropped his jaw in wonderment.

That person squatted down before Banri's eyes, peered at his awful visage, and then looked up NANA-senpai's face.

"Good grief, NANA-senpai... venting your anger by beating up on your neighbor Tada Banri...?"

"He's an idiot, maybe. Dunno. He's not my type."

Looking like she was dying to have a cigarette in her mouth, NANA-senpai restlessly fiddled around with a 100-yen lighter in her hand.

"This guy did it to himself, and suddenly came asking for help. That's all."

I'm out of smokes.

Saying that point blank, NANA-senpai promptly withdrew to her own apartment.

Her door closing with a snick, those left behind, Banri and,

"She doesn't listen when I tell her she ought to stop smoking. I mean, I was surprised. What, what to do? Suddenly from NANA-senpai came an e-mail saying 'I'm taking Tada Banri to the clinic.' Already surprised, leaving the lecture I came here for now, but, I mean, are you okay? Really, what happened here? Did you get injured?"

"..."

"...Tada Banri? Can you stand?"

"..."

"...Hold on, oy? What are you looking at? Why don't you go into your room?"

"..."

---It's. Linda.

When I'm in trouble, she comes running.

And now, she's here.

She's here.

Somehow having gotten to where he looked like he had been crying, Banri covered his face in a hurry.

* * *

Putting Banri to bed, Linda left the room one time, but was back in only ten minutes.

"I'm back..."

Urk

"I mean, pardon me once more for the intrusion."

His body buried in the towel-blanket, Banri resisted an uncomfortable urge to jump.

In Linda's hands were a white bag from a convenience store, and a yellow one from the drug-store. She lifted them up for Banri to see.

"You didn't eat anything before taking your medicine, did you? How about it? Does anything here look good?"

On her knees at his bed-side, she was rather close. Too close.

Pretending to be acting absentmindedly due to his fever--- not at all an uncommon behavior--- Banri closed his eyes and turned his face towards the wall, dead tired.

Linda pulled one thing after another from a plastic bag to show him: sports drinks, appetizer breads shredded so he could eat them. And then by the yogurt, some cold packs.

"How's that?"

On her knees looking down at his face,

"...Oh, and here you go!"

She twisted his upper body around and as soon as she had lifted him up, she took out a coldpack. Laughing like crazy as she did it, she ripped open the package and stuck it to his forehead. With his head returned to the pillow like that, he sluggishly stared at Linda's cheeks.

"What's with you, Tada Banri? The way you're acting..."

"Ehee, whatcha mean!?"

"...You're acting strange."

"Eh!? Whaddya mean, what!?"

"...So, what's going on here, really..."

As a matter of fact, the nervously shaking Banri couldn't honestly tell what Linda's expression was. With what kind of face, with what kind of eyes, what strange behavior she was seeing in him he had no idea.

He was flustered. And then worried. He was bewildered. He was tense. Like that, bouncing all over, he was desperately trying just to keep his expression blank. It was the best he could do.

In his own way, for now, it was like he was trying to get back to the carefree mood he had during that time he had just spent with NANA-senpai--- it was, but.

'I don't know what kind of face I should show.'

It was his good friend Two Dimensions' trademark expression. Like the time a little too much of the shared bill had been paid for him, the time he'd been given part of a side-dish in the school cafeteria, the time the trays had been cleaned up for him quickly, the time he'd been brought

some water in passing, and so forth. At times like that, the guy would often have his hair all thrown forward around his face, and would say it with a flat voice, acting the part of Ayanami Rei. While this was going on, Banri would be thinking "Should I laugh?" but unable to speak the words, would just smile faintly. He could even laugh "That's not right! That's awful!" at a cliché like that, and Banri right now was surely in that state of mind.

What kind of face he should show in Linda's presence, he did not know.

To that extent, her's was the face he thought he wanted to see. She was the person he thought he wanted to be with. Somewhere in his heart, he must have been thinking, "I want to go back, I am dying to go back." In only one night, he had suddenly come to be like this.

A blank expression, or something like it, he simply could not show. That much was a given in any case.

"Hey you... is it just the fever's fault you're strange? Are you really okay?"

Linda muttered suspiciously, opened the sports drink top and held the bottle out to him. The chilled bottle, Banri's muggy room, was as wet as if it were sweating. At that moment, the drops dripping...

"Anyway, have a drink. I brought you a straw too."

---A drop of water fell, running from Linda's fingertip to her wrist.

Having seen that, or rather noticing that he had seen that, he felt ashamed at how his gaze clung to that clear water drop as it went smoothly down her skin. He was unable to take his eyes from it.

"..."

Unable to say anything more, Banri couldn't help but hang his head. He covered his eyes as if he were separating himself that way, not saying a word. His face was flushed, his breathing difficult. He was just like a little kid. He was one sad beast, having forgotten how to speak. A very embarrassed creature.

Already unable to simply pretend and laugh it off, his swollen face throbbed to the hot pulsation. If Linda were to see it, he couldn't help but die.

Without a television, the room was small, and in the quiet, Banri desperately tried to hide the sound of his breathing. 'Say something quickly, Linda,' he girlishly prayed for help from above. Please do something, anything. Break this silence for me. In a closed room like this, with no concealing shadows, where one can show their feelings openly... even though the only one getting uncomfortable was himself, doing it on his own.

Linda inserted a straw into the mouth of the bottle she held in her hands and,

"Mmm"

With a jerk of her chin, she told him to drink. Her eyes closed partially like a cat's, she had such a face. Acting like she was older than him.

Banri looked at it and doing as he was told, as if greedily, bit down on the straw. He finished it without talking nor even thinking, in any case he did what he was supposed to. Completely engrossed, he sucked up the cold drink and gulped it down, eyes closed, as if clinging to every sensation as it passed by.

But the moment he had drank one mouthful, Banri realized just how dried-out his throat had been. The sweet, cool drink he hadn't particularly thought about wanting, and when he realized he wanted it badly, he practically drank it all in one gulp.

Unbeknownst to him, his body had been dying of thirst and craved something moist.

Looking at Banri, who was taking an instinctive breath,

"That's good, drink, drink. Well, shall we have this next?"

Linda took the empty PET bottle, and passed him a container of yogurt. Opening the foil lid halfway, she stuck the straw he'd just used into the opening and,

"You can suck this that way too; it looks like your mouth doesn't hurt so much. It's rather strange, but nobody can see you."

Banri didn't have the heart at the moment to say things like 'you seem to be watching over me.' Doing as Linda had told him, he started sucking the plain yogurt through the straw. When he pursed his swollen lips, the pain ran through them but still, it would probably hurt to eat it normally with a spoon. The bandage was a hindrance too, and it was probably all dirty.

"Can you manage some bread?"

Banri, the straw still held in his mouth, quickly shook his head side to side and with his eyes kept Linda from tearing open the other bag. As you might expect, he didn't think he was up to chewing something solid.

"I understand. Well, then when you're done drinking that, there's your medicine. Err, where'd it wind up?"

Is this it? Linda twisted her body around and reached out, grabbing hold of the pharmacy bag she found on the table. Sitting down cross-legged on the floor, her downturned head hiding her eyes, she started reading the printed instructions on the prescribed medicines. The air coming through the now emptied yogurt straw made a strange noise.

On her white complexion, free of cosmetics, her naturally long, delicate eyelashes cast a shadow

like a fan,

"...Ah,"

---Like that, finally.

Finally, today, Banri felt he could look Linda straight in the face, honestly, for the first time. At last he knew. Linda, who was wearing a light blue jersey, a matching dark blue tunic, and skinny jeans. Her small lap was slim and elegantly rounded too.

Banri squeezed his voice out.

"...Thank you, Linda..."

"Hmm?"

He had muttered it so softly, Linda probably didn't even hear him. A gentle smile floating on her lips, both her lovely eyes open, Linda raised her face. Turning to that face,

"...Thank you very much, Linda-senpai. For coming out and checking on such a mess as this."

Flustered, Banri disguised his expression. He took the time to make the face of an underclassman. Not the face of a classmate with an unrequited love.

Linda's laughter rose softly, and the skin around her eyes crinkled up.

"What, so formal? It's okay like that. It seems like I've said I'll do anything to help you out."

"No, but... I've even made you skip class."

"But it's okay. I'm fine. As you are Banri, I am Linda. So this much support is natural."

In a playful manner, Linda stabbed her index finger at Banri, making it plain who she was referring to.

"And so, don't think about anything else while you get spoiled by gentle me."

You are Banri...

When he tried to laugh back, a sharp pain ran around his lips and they stiffened.

(...You’re different.)

The surging pain felt horrible, as if it were piercing his very heart. You have changed. Such was his inner voice.

Putting it into words and getting it out of his mouth was hard, and so saying nothing still, Banri

quietly stared at the end of Linda's chin.

He was not the "Banri" that called out for Linda.

Even while inheriting that Banri's feelings, his current self was changed into something lower, he felt. Himself before he lost his memories. The self from which the memories were lost. And then, the feelings towards Linda were passed on to this self. He felt that each had a separate existence. He thought to himself, I have completely changed.

Therefore, the Tada Banri being watched by Linda right now, though he was a guy Linda didn't know,

"Did you understand?"

Smiling with her head tilted to one side, as if to set him at ease, the standing Linda was almost certainly not feeling such things.

Not quite cured, the remnants of the fever were making Banri's breathing overly painful. Linda's back was bent over, slender and flexible, as she searched for a glass in the open kitchen cupboard. Her bare ankles. The clear shadow of her Achille's tendon. Banri messed up his hair with his hands.

"...Argh..."

"Hm? What?"

Automatically letting out a sigh, Linda returned to Banri's side, as graceful as a deer. Pouring water into a glass, she returned to the bedside in her bare feet.

"What'd you say just now?"

Handing him the water,

"...Well, err... NANA-senpai, she was unexpectedly nice to me..."

At his dodging the question with those words, Linda gave a big nod, saying "Yes, yes, yes, she is."

"That's the way she is. However that person looks, she really takes care of you. You get the feeling she's helped a lot of people like me. In spite of appearances, she doesn't just ignore people in trouble. Yes, the medicine. This and this, one tablet apiece."

Placing them in the palm of his hand and watching to make sure Banri drank it down,

"There you go."

Said Linda with a tone of voice as if she were training a dog, then she nodded. Taking back the glass once more she stood, taking it back to the sink for him.

Grabbing the stool in the corner of the kitchen, she pulled it over and sat herself down, and proceeded to look all around the room, as if surveying it, as if she were slowly picking up and counting each and every thing in the room.

The look of her hair in the summer sunlight coming through the glass was the soft grey of squirrel's fur mixed with brown. Her cheeks too, they seemed to glitter whitely. Or rather, with a light voice, she talked by the side of Banri's bed.

"Oh yeah, that was it. What were you doing going out with NANA-senpai? Did you perhaps know NANA-senpai from before you knew you were neighbors?"

"Ah..., well, I've only known she was my neighbor since the other day, but my first encounter,"

The first encounter...

She offered me a cigarette.

When we went out to a café for a bowl of café-au-lait.

Crying from having been dumped by Yanagisawa, Kaga Kouko.

Kaga-san.

The present Banri's perfect girlfriend.

---What the heck am I doing?

"...In the rain!"

Suddenly with a voice like shouting,

"Doesn't she seem like a stray dog in the rain!? She's a sneaky one, isn't she!? Like that!"

"...Huh?"

Linda stared blankly back, puzzled, at Banri and the cryptic words he had spouted out.

"No, but about NANA-senpai though! Look, though she's super scary at first glance, in reality isn't she like that stray dog in the rain...!? Do you get what I'm trying to say!?"

"...Ah, well, sort of."

"Having started off with a negative impression, I've come to have a strangely high opinion of her! Isn't it like that!?"

Banri kept on raising his voice desperately. On the verge of suffocating, gasping pathetically, he didn't wait for Linda's reply, if only to be able to hide his nervousness and his shaking,

"Though I get the feeling that you're always nice to me, by nature, NANA-senpai has a super rare, more incredible 'a bit nice' feeling to her!"

"What? Are you going overboard? Are you getting full of yourself now?"

"I'm carried away! I'm excited!"

Trying to laugh like a total fool,

"...Pfft!"

For an instant, he had forgotten about the cut on his lips. His wound stinging, feeling like it had split open once more, Banri reflexively turned his face to cover his mouth.

"Banri!"

"..."

He showed the palm of his hand like either of a temple's guardian images to Linda, who was getting up from the stool as if leaping, indicating she didn't need to come over.

"Haha, I'm okay."

"You're an idiot; enough already. What're you messing around for?"

"...I seem to have gotten high. Though I think my fever is to blame."

"I wonder..."

Linda's voice sounded slightly disgusted, but she was thoroughly pampering Banri. Her smile filled with gentleness, she absolutely would not hurt Banri's feelings.

To Banri, that was scary.

'I want to go back to where Linda is!'

Even knowing how strong the feelings were that he carried, and what he himself wished for, was scary. He wondered what in the world would happen, what it would take to satisfy him. Like his throat when it wanted water, just what he would try to drink down?

He also thought of the place he wanted to be at. Where he wanted something, and was ready to try and reach his hand out for it, but which was probably not there to take his hand. So it was. From the very start he alone wanted to go back there, but there was no promise to await him

there. He should make sure to get a clear word about that.

But even so, he wondered why was Linda nice to him like this. Did she miss him? Was it trauma from having lost him once?

Did she perhaps not understand that he was somebody she didn't know?

Once again in the mode of saying nothing, Banri slowly closed his eyes. He felt Linda's anxious gaze on the area of his eyelids.

"I sent a message to Ko-ko-chan earlier. She'll be coming over soon for sure."

"...Aah..."

It was as if the edge of his memories were melting out of focus.

Banri's girlfriend. Kaga Kouko. Having been able to get his unrequited love to finally, at long last, turn towards him, she was to him a completely different lover.

For the self here now, she seemed like somebody he had somehow met in a dream. Really, it was like he was wondering: is this a real person? She didn't feel real, it didn't feel like reality,

"...I want to see her..."

It was practically unconscious. Such were the words his mouth came with. His tongue didn't have a touch sweet enough to leave an impression.

If you called the particular world where Kaga Kouko lived reality, then he wanted her to try and appear before him. But in that case, then just about everything he could see was getting messed up by this high fever. He was in an embarrassing state, he felt like he should not even be there, and had a guilty conscience as well. What had been happening up to a moment ago, even if it was something he could have sworn had happened, the colors had swiftly washed out. The dream had gone pale and faded away. His dense self had a hard time accepting that it had happened like that.

Banri's words apparently not having reached Linda's ears, a low chuckle could be heard. It seemed to him that the voice tickling his ears was real.

Banri opened his fever-bleary eyes. Slowly turning his head, he looked over at Linda, seated on the stool.

"Hm? What's up?"

Linda asked, her head tilted to one side.

"Is there something you want?"

With a supple motion standing up without a sound, stepping on the flooring barefoot, she came over to Banri's side. Banri watched steadily. Perhaps he thought that Linda would take a blink of his eyes as agreement. In that silent, closed room, their eyes met, ...and it was at that moment.

Bam! The unlocked door was pushed open so hard it bounced back. Banri gasped.

He felt the summer wind, fragrant but filled with brutal heat, blow into the room all at once. It suddenly switched places with the air that was formerly confined inside.

Clack! Clack! Loudly and sharply, the sound of those high-heels were letting him know of her coming into the entrance area. 'My shoes have got to be Louboutin or Manolo. Aren't four inch heels an iron-clad rule?' --- The sweet remembered voice took a firm grip, as if dragging it from his brain. Banri's eyes opened wide. This sounded like Louboutins. His ears answered him, having been fully trained. They were probably her recent favorites, those guys with in deep blue with the black satin ribbon. When he had casually overheard the price, Banri had said nothing for all of ten seconds... not even a 'my goodness.' Oh, he was certain. They were completely for real.

And so, that person who stepped into the real world, suddenly wedging her long leg into the space between Banri's bed and Linda,

"...mpf!"

Just like with the point of a sword.

"...Are you cheating on me?"

Thrust right in front of Banri's nose as if to wake him up, there was a vivid pink bouquet of roses.

The overflowing, rich fragrance thrilled his nose. It was even aggressively strong, rose, rose, rose... rose!

"Ka..."

It truly was reality.

"ga, san..."

Banri, practically dumbfounded, opened his eyes wide. Still laying on the bed, he stiffened.

How, he wondered, could he have thought that this person's existence may have been something out of a dream? How could he forget, he wondered?

Something so vivid, the existence of a lover so magnificent, aaah, at any rate...

"Good morning, Tada-kun. Even though you have a lover, you're together with somebody else like this. I ask you once more, perfectly, are you cheating on me?"

What should he do? The queen of roses was in full wrath. There was only one choice for the background music inside the endangered Banri's head: Dark Vader's Theme. Though you are C-3PO, the music and the character didn't go together, so he couldn't even laugh.

The contours of her cheeks were drawn perfectly. Her skin was of flawless marble. Her face was shaped beautifully and perfect.

Radiant, she was a lovely person.

Her almond shaped eyes, clearly emphasized by jet black mascara and eyeliner, sparkled like stars as they focused on Banri... or rather, glittering like those of a carnivore that had already spotted its prey, having that same terrible glint in her eyes.

She was grinning. But perfectly.

Her long and wavy hair set off her milky white skin prettily with a dark brown. She was wearing a beige satin hairband. And a white, all-lace mini one-piece dress with an ascot style collar, no slip and a high waist. She had an antique Gucci bag slung by her side, in what Kouko called her 'Jackie style'... not Chan, of course. It was *not* kung-fu clothing. She emulated the classic

fashion model personified in Jacqueline, who was originally the wife of a president and, after his assassination, the wife of a shipping magnate. Even if her feet happened to be in rose-motif slippers (980 yen) bought expressly for her use.

In Banri's mind at present, he was imagining distinctly the setting of their meeting.

That spring morning, alighting from the taxi, a perfect woman raised a bouquet of deep red roses overhead.

Dancing in the deep blue sky, the color of flower petals.

Scattered on the cheeks of the eating Banri, cool water droplets.

And now, without any room for doubt, in a real space, before Banri's eyes, Kouko once more raised a bouquet of roses overhead.

Just like that time again, being struck--- Banri instinctively tried to shield the lower half of his injured face with his hand, but,

"...Just kidding."

Kouko tossed the raised flower bouquet behind her.

Wrapping Banri's ears with her now empty hands, setting one knee on the mattress and bending half over as if jumping into bed with him, she planted a big kiss on his hot forehead.

"Uh, oooh...!?"

Without thinking about it shrugging her shoulders like a little girl, she looked at the trembling Banri, her smiling, rose-pink lips like a flower bud opening. There was a lipstick mark there now, right in the middle of his forehead.

Backing away slightly, Kouko, like a child finding fault,

"Honestly Tada-kun, what in the world happened to you that you had to go to the hospital? You shouldn't be so reckless when I'm not watching you."

Lowering her voice, she scolded him like a puppy: Bad!

But one second later, she gave him that perfect smile once more.

"Anyway, since I've come, you don't have anything else to worry about, right? You can leave it all to me! To this me! The woman that I am! Precisely! Perfectly! Because I will handle nursing Tada-kun!"

And then from the entry door, squealing while picking up the bouquet that Kouko had thrown

behind herself,

"I'm going to be the next one to get married!"

"No way, I'm going to be the next one married!"

Two Dimensions and Mitsuo were playing the roles of good gay friends. While they were crying airily, just in case,

"No, I will be the one getting married..."

When from the bed Banri raised his hand to try and take part, there was a chorus of "Please, please!"

Linda, *sotto voce*, asked "...Did you guys come to do a comedy routine?"

Chapter 2

2

Heavy, explosive, very forceful... such a sound has the word 'woman,' but overall, whether his lover was a suitable and beautiful woman or not, she was certainly complicated.

Nonetheless, he instinctively felt there was something uncalled for in Kaga Kouko today. She was being strangely heavy, and explosive.

Still lying down on the bed, his body feeling heavy and nearly dead from fever, Banri was watching Kouko and his friends seated close by in the narrow room, envious of their excellent condition.

"I really was just kidding. I just thought it would be funny if I said you were cheating. I was trying to get a laugh."

Closest to Banri's bed, positioned right next to the mattress, her head held high and sitting beautifully with her legs to one side, truly the princess, Kouko broke the silence. A silk handkerchief spread across her lap, she covered her legs elegantly as if she were out on a picnic date.

Her smile was composed. She had an aura of calm. She had the appearance of born royalty.

"After all, there is no way my Tada-kun would cheat on me."

Before anybody could think about shaking their heads or interrupting with a snort,

"Tada-kun loves me completely after all. Of course I know that. ...He loves me!"

Suddenly sitting up straight, the veins popped in her temples and her voice rose. Ooh... everybody pulled back a little.

"Or rather, that absolute confidence makes me grow stronger and stronger. The power of being loved runs through me and makes me feel even better, and that in turn makes you... ouch!"

Left to herself, she would have been able to keep on talking forever, but Linda, who was seated next to her, struck her near her white elbow.

"But didn't you look really serious just now!? Seriously, cut it out. For a moment there you really scared me!"

"You're imagining things."

Rubbing the stricken area in a strangely happy way, Kouko elegantly fluttered her big eyelashes with their jet-black mascara. With a light purple eye shadow softly feathered, she was today again so feminine she glowed.

Behaving that way to the extreme, bearing herself like a beautiful actress, she pulled out from

her bag some sort of small, round thing only a girl would have, a container the likes of an oyster shell.

"Should I be so strangely suspicious towards the Linda-senpai who came to the aid of my destined Tada-kun? Though I had thought that NANA-senpai would be here too. Has she returned to her place next door?"

She scooped out some of the contents with her ring finger. When Linda answered "Yes, she did," she continued, saying "What a shame, I really wanted to thank her," and then rubbed her soft lips with that fingertip. What she had taken with her finger looked like rose-pink lip gloss, and the sparkle of the melting glaze colored her well-shaped womanly lips more and more beautifully.

Like that, deliberately, she turned towards Banri and her eyes turned gentle. No voice coming out, the others unable to see her expression, she communicated only with Banri, her lips moving,

"Are you okay?"

She said; just the one phrase.

I'm fine, thank you, said Banri, also voicelessly, nodding only to Kouko. Across Kouko's white cheeks, a gentle smile slowly broadened.

Already, there was absolutely no way he was going to speak about having seen such a face, Banri thought.

Kouko had placed the bouquet of roses, her gift to him, by his bedside, just like flowers by a gravestone. ...It's fragrance was now getting rather too strong for his sick body. If he could, he'd set it aside quickly, it was so...

She was missing the mark, but there was no lie in her sincerity. In Kouko's gaze a genuine love was growing, unsullied by even one drop of mud.

When you are dedicated to something that way, you don't worry about your own condition.

Besides, as always--- there was still the matter of the photo. He didn't think that would be touched upon right now.

The picture of him and Linda together, taken in the old days. Banri wondered if Kouko had taken it with her. It was a possibility. Kouko had come down to this room so many times now, and besides there was what happened a few days ago, the day of the Omaken rehearsal. In the middle of that rainstorm. To Banri, it seemed she had gotten awfully unstable emotionally, and had simply burst out into tears for no reason he could understand.

Now, thinking about it, to put it simply, he wondered if it was because she had seen the picture of himself with Linda.

He felt like he had to double-check: Had she perhaps seen the picture? And then taken it? And then, if it seemed like it, then he had to explain the truth to her. Between this and that, tied together with his memory loss, he had not spoken yet to Kouko of his earlier time with Linda.

But, looking like that at his lover smiling at him, he didn't feel particularly able to broach that topic just now.

Besides, in reality, Kouko probably had nothing to do with his losing the picture.

It was simply somewhere, perhaps stuck between the pages of a book. It was likely, and he thought he would prefer that to have happened. First and foremost, being together with Linda in this situation, he didn't think he could just ask straight out from the start.

Giving up everything, putting his own heart to rest, Banri filled his nasal cavities with the sweet smell of the roses. He grew even more dizzy. Kouko let her gentle smile slip from Banri, turning towards Linda.

"Linda-senpai, once again, thank you very much. For your having cared for my Tada-kun, as a woman, I am truly grateful. Please please convey my gratitude to NANA-senpai as well."

"Yes, of course, I was just going to say that. Because we were planning on heading to school once she got back, I was going to do it then. Or rather, if it's all right with you, may I give your contact information to NANA-senpai? That way, if something happens like this time again, though we don't want it to happen, then she'll be able to contact you directly, right away."

"Yes! Sure! Of course! I don't mind!"

Suddenly the well raised 'good girl', she made the expression of the devoted underclassman, nodding and answering to Linda,

"You sure do put on an incredible show. That was completely different from what you were saying a little bit ago."

The voice that burst out in undisguised amazement was that of Yanagisawa Mitsuo.

As Kouko's childhood friend, formerly her unrequited (they say she was even stalking him) partner in love, at the moment you could call him her natural enemy, kept close. Better known as: Yana-ssan.

Anyway, he was a handsome guy, who even when he was dressed simply, in a short gray shirt and old blue-jeans, just by being part of the background, he made Banri's ordinary room look like a stylish movie set. And beyond that, though even in the worst of times he was blessed with the appearance of a natural airhead, lately, because of his new hair-style, his wildness and masculinity has grown rapidly. What's more, having been referred for a moving job by his film studies club upperclassmen, and having started working there, the muscles of his upper body were standing out more and more. He was a guy whose popularity was skyrocketing.

Mitsuo, still sitting cross-legged across from Kouko, with whom he had various complicated connections.

"What're you acting all Miss Goody Two-shoes for? It creeps me out."

He shrugged his shoulders.

Speaking of Kouko,

"...Huh?"

For the moment, she still had a smiling face.

But her gaze alone sharpened to an irritated glare, as cold as a perfect icicle, scowling daggers at Mitsuo.

But as you might expect from their having known each other a long time, even if against his will, even such a look as that wasn't going to silence Mitsuo. 'I wonder if he's immune?' Banri thought as he looked from the one to the other. He had a feeling that if eyes such as those were directed at him, his own will would be burnt out in an instant.

"Don't give me 'huh?' Weren't you just now making a lot of noise, 'It's cheating, cheating, cheating I say! Tada-kun is cheating on me! This is absolutely cheating, cheating, cheating! Phaa!' It was jealousy, plain as day. Right, Two Dimensions? In fact, that was why you even made us come along with you, wasn't it? You even said something like 'Restrain me! In case of emergency, restrain me with all your might!' That's a fact!"

"...Err, well..."

Suddenly, Two Dimensions caught the smoothly talking handsome guy's shoulder.

For now, even though his real name was Satou Takaya, many of his friends had entirely forgotten the fact, or never knew at all, he figured.

Two Dimensions, like somebody from the petit bourgeoisie, was quietly watching Kouko's expression. Banri couldn't see him. But, as a result of having watched Kouko's expression,

"...Well, in that area, in three dimensional relationships, I know nothing at all!"

It looked like Two Dimensions had decided it was time to change the subject. Setting a serene smile on his face and twisting his black-rimmed glasses a little,

"Or should I say, good morning! Sorry about that, it's our first meeting and yet we're going on like this. It'd be fine with me if you would please call me Two Dimensions."

Confused in his deception, and realizing it was their first meeting, he smiled in greeting to Linda.

"Two Dimensions? Is that your name?"

Tilting her head in curiosity, Linda directed a kindly, upperclassman-like smile at Two Dimensions.

"Yes, because I've cast aside the three dimensional. As a sign of that, I call myself Two Dimensions!"

"Oh, that's deeep."

"For now, I even have a bride."

"Eh!? There's no way you can marry a character, is there!?"

"My bride is the work of my own heart. Shall I tell you that story now?"

"Ah, no need. I'm Linda, from your same law school. I'm a second-year participating in the Omaken with Banri and Kouko-chan. Good to meet you, Two Dimensions."

"And it's good to meet you too! Ah, and it's pleasure, to unexpectedly connect with those above me!"

"You haven't joined any clubs?"

"I haven't managed to fully enter one, so here I am. Senpai, you haven't been introduced to Yanagisawa here before, have you?"

"I've spoken with Yanagisawa-kun, or rather Yana-ssan, a bit over one of his courses before. Right?"

Linda started to look towards Mitsuo when suddenly her hand was pulled to the side,

"Linda-senpai, could you please forgive Mitsuo? Mitsuo is rather sick in the head."

That was Kouko.

Softly placing Linda's hand on her own chest, "Sick, or rather, to be blunt, his head is full of crap! It's no good!" she drove home the point, her face serious. At the sight of Kouko speaking like that in spite of her princess-like looks, Linda snorted,

"'Full of crap!' What a way to talk!"

"But it's true! This kid looks normal, but he is in the habit of lying. The poor thing, he doesn't even know what he is saying. His brain is going bald on the outside, and inside is hollow, like an idiot. Or rather, he really is going to go bald, very soon now! Because that perm solution will have made all his roots go away!"

"Huh!? Kouko, you have such a way with words! There's no way I'm going to forgive you for dissing my roots!"

"Oh boy, another seizure."

Mitsuo reared back, forcing himself unnaturally, a faint, malicious smile on his lips, and said to Kouko,

"Are you... full of crap!?"

And,

"You were shouting 'come along with me,' so helplessly we,"

"Yes, yes that's right! In Mitsuo's world that's how it is! He understood. That's good!"

Kouko, her hands clasped together beneath her chin, the very picture of the heroine on the cover of a girl's comic book, blinking her eyes adorably over and over again,

"Well, then, will you leave!? The entrance is over there!"

With a serious look on her face, suddenly jerking her finger to one side, she said, "Mitsuo, go home."

"..."

When he didn't win with his mouth, Mitsuo was left with his strength. All of a sudden he grabbed the end of Kouko's chin forcefully, his thumb at the tip,

"Shall I give your butt-chin a bleeding hemorrhoid!?"

He was crossing a bit over into Seikima II.

"Kyaaaaa! It's breaking, it's breaking, it's breaaaakkking!"

Tell the struggling Kouko to shut up and bending roughly over her... seen from the side it was like a rape scene from a movie. Of course, Kouko resisted him with a desperate expression, her beautifully painted fingernails reaching violently, catching his long hair like eagle's talons,

"Oh you sonnafa...! You, you, you don't pull on my hair! Let go!"

"And you let go of my chin! You started it!"

While the pair of childhood friends looked like they were grabbing each other unseemingly, and were starting to roll on the floor noisily,

"Hey! Stop fighting! I mean, you're making noise next to a sick person!"

...Thank you oh so kindly, in his thoughts Banri applauded Linda, who had forced herself between the two of them.

At the same time as the two childhood friends started to threaten one another in their usual way, Two Dimensions started putting up an obvious "I don't want to have anything to do with them" aura, fiddling with his iPhone, as if he had put up a barrier of cool-ness around him.

"Ah... excuse us. Sorry, Tada-kun..."

Looking like she felt horribly awkward, at length returning to her senses, Kouko got up and peered into Banri's face.

Banri shook his head side to side, saying "No, no, it's no big deal."

And with that, an idea as slim as a hair of his head entered into him, and he got the feeling that he was seeing something fragile suddenly breaking.

Was it due to how her perfectly done up hair had been disarrayed by the fighting just now, or was it because the center of her necklace had gotten turned around to the middle of her back, or was it perhaps due to how she had been in an obscene hand-to-hand combat with her childhood friend right before her boyfriend's eyes?

Up to that point, Kouko's entire being had been filled, as if to overflowing, with a very stable aura... able to say with absolute self-confidence "I am loved!" but it was now suddenly lost. It seemed to Banri that it had entirely left her.

Kouko was discouraged, so dispirited you could hear the sound of her looking downwards,

"...In other words, it's the truth? You weren't thinking about things like cheating on me? There weren't, any thoughts, though..."

Taking a short breath, she glared at Mitsuo once more. It seemed that what her childhood friend had said had pierced to the heart of the matter.

Banri thought he wanted to say something, but Kouko had immediately turned towards Linda.

"I wasn't thinking, senpai. But, how to put it, for any girl but me to come running to nurse Tada-kun first... I got off to a late start, or rather, actually, perhaps I got upset, so to speak... well... I cannot deny it..."

When she didn't seem to make herself clear, even Linda slumped with a look of disappointment. Kouko turned her pretty face towards the floor, fidgeting uncomfortably, digging at a crack in the flooring with her fingernail repeatedly (and because it was rather dirty, she probably ought not to have been doing that...),

"...And because of that, I brought the boys as companions! It was an underhanded thing to do."

"Ah, we were to be companions?"

There was approval in Two Dimensions' voice.

"Two Dimensions for NANA-senpai. Mitsuo for Linda-senpai. By sealing off our lovely senpai's girl power that way, Tada-kun would be left with the impression that I was the 'reliable girl.'"

"You're quite the strategist, Kouko-chan."

"...I felt like I was drowning..."

"It's okay. Hey, look over here. My girl-power looks like this."

The gentle Linda shuffled over on her knees and inserted herself between the two guys. Then all of a sudden, throwing her arms around their shoulders,

"I've been given twin hosts! Aren't they two pistols!? Aren't they nice!? Hm!? Look here, it's Yana-ko and 2D-ko! And their comic dance routine!"

Banri recognized it. Or rather, he saw it.

Mitsuo and Two Dimensions were both messing around and playing the part of giddy school-girls, while at the same time snuggling up to Linda-senpai's form. Showing a surprisingly not entirely uncomfortable smile (oh my!)--- she channeled Matsuda Yuusaku a little bit, saying "What the..."

Or rather.

They weren't twins.

They weren't pistols either.

They'd turned themselves into geisha, come in from outside to pay a visit. Yana-ko, in any case, because '2D-ko' didn't quite manage it.

"..."

Enduring alone what seemed to be a dizzy, spinning attack by his mucous membranes on his brain, without the strength of will to pull himself out of it, Banri gazed the whole time at his friends' apparently quite fun banter without seeing it at all.

It seemed that both Mitsuo and Two Dimensions had entirely accepted Linda, a person who always left you with the impression of being easy-going towards anybody. From the time he had hung around with the two of them, by seeing the strangely happy expressions on their faces, he knew that much. They were stuck to Linda still, overly familiar with her, and whatever they said it was with a laugh. Linda was laughing excitedly as well, answering the guy's jokes with light

punches to their shoulders.

"Come to think of it, Yana-ko, that class you just took, did it turn out well for you? For no particular reason afterwards, I was thinking 'Will he be okay? How'd it turn out for him?'"

"Yes! Thanks to you, Linda-senpai, it turned out fine, and I'm okay!"

"You didn't botch any of the first term final exams, did you?"

"Just language study, I think. The rest were easy."

"How about 2D-ko and Kou-ko?"

"I'm fine!"

"I'm doing fine too, with my report almost done."

"That so? Good, good. Well then, all of you can look forward to a cheerful summer vacation."

...And what about Ban-ko?

Couldn't you ask about Ban-ko?

Watching his friends trying in vain to raise his spirits, "That's right! It's summer vacation! Yay!" Banri, alone and depressed, held his tongue.

His lips hurt, of course, even though they were shut, and his dizziness wasn't subsiding at all.

"Wow, I'm looking forward to this summer vacation! It feels like a dream: having the rest of summer free, a whole month and a half! Being college students is the best!"

Under normal conditions, even Kouko was inclined to feel excessively lonely, but whether it was because they felt free to speak about whatever they felt like, or because Banri's room felt like home, they all seemed to be having fun, from the bottom of their hearts.

Everyone had their backs turned to Banri's bed, chattering and laughing at jokes. It seemed entirely like his presence had been forgotten.

...He wondered if he was being too peevish. It figured.

"Real-ly, being college students is truly the best! Linda-senpai, do you have anything planned for summer vacation? Like a trip abroad?"

When Two Dimensions made an attempt at rousing Linda's interest,

"Ah, though I don't have money to travel abroad, I think I'd still like to take a trip. But, it's just 'I'd like.' I have no plans. Realistically, I'd go home, kill some time, and probably do nothing but

visit some friends back there."

"Oh, you aren't from around here? Where are you from?"

When the conversation came to Banri's ears, his body suddenly stiffened beneath the towel-blanket.

Home. Home-town. ...It was suddenly a dangerous topic.

If they had such a conversation, sooner or later his and Linda's relationship would be exposed---maybe. He was going to peek at Linda's face right away, but his body only moved sluggishly.

No, he wasn't particularly worried about being exposed. But regarding his memory loss, that... absolutely nobody could be permitted to know that, the feeling came back to him anew, that...

"Anyway, the beach!"

Raising her voice conspicuously, Linda suddenly clapped her hands together and spoke.

"Of course, I want to go to the beach! It's summer! And it's hot! I want to go play as hard as I can! You guys said you had no plans, right? To go to the beach together! That sort of thing."

"Oh, that's good! I'd really like going to the beach!"

Mitsuo gave a big nod of agreement. And Two Dimensions,

"I have a license. It'd be fun to rent a car and go together."

"Then let's go! Summer's finally here. Should we go somewhere close like Shounan? Or we could go all the way to Izu! The bunch of us together would be good, and a lot of fun! Seriously, let's go! Let's decide on that!"

Mitsuo pointed once around the whole room with his finger.

...For some reason, he was in a strange mood. Banri thought this was perhaps the first time he'd seen Mitsuo actively setting something up like this. What's more, he was casually inviting even his natural enemy Kouko. What was this atmosphere all of a sudden, though he wasn't in the condition to take part in the interaction?

He probably just didn't notice such regrets of Banri's, but,

"What? Are you inviting me too?"

Kouko asked in a flat voice. Mitsuo ignored it smoothly.

"You mean, you'd rather invite me too?"

Even though Linda was asking the very same thing, she was quite cheerful, though she couldn't quite manage an ear-to-ear smile, and turned towards him a slightly shy face.

"Of course! It'd be boring if Kouko were the only girl!"

An immediate thumbs up reply. ...What's with that? Seriously. What're you doing, Yanagisawa Mitsuo? But Banri wasn't even thinking that. His thoughts drifted, scattered by the fever, no longer coherent.

"Yay! Then let's invite your neighbor NANA-senpai!"

Acquainted with NANA-senpai, Kouko snorted at Linda's words. Like she couldn't take it anymore, she opened her mouth and laughed like crazy, her body twisting as if in pain,

"Se, senpai! NANA-senpai and the sea don't at all go together! Ahahahahaha, there's no way, absolutely no way! The sun would burn her to a crisp! That'd be awful! It'd be truly awful!"

"Fuhahahaha! She'd turn into smoke for sure, and then disappear, wouldn't she!?"

Linda started laughing with her too. Two Dimensions bent forward, studying the laughing pair of girls.

"Eh, eh, what kind of person is 'NANA-senpai'? Does she live right next door to here? Does Yana-ssan know her?"

"No, I don't know her either. Does she go to our school?"

"Yes, she's a third-year. Well, to put it frankly, she's a cosplayer though,"

---It's not cosplay!

His field of vision having gradually blurred, Banri stayed quiet still, looking up vaguely at the spinning ceiling.

Was his fever going up again? The voices of his friends laughing and chatting were in some place far from him, and sounded like something happening in another world.

His mood still peevish, he was now feeling quite alienated.

He felt quite clearly that he was becoming like an invisible man, or a ghost.

Banri didn't even know whether he was included (or not) when Mitsuo spoke a little bit ago about "the bunch of us."

Whether his own form was visible to other people's eyes or not, he wasn't really sure.

Perhaps nobody knew he was here. Perhaps nobody knows anything about me. Perhaps they didn't notice him, and nobody here was even concerned about him. Perhaps he could not be seen. Perhaps he could not be heard.

Leaving his unmoving self behind, they all might just leave.

...He wondered if this was some kind of abject childish "odd one out" loneliness.

Or else what?

"..."

Banri sluggishly closed his eyelids and let out a deep, hot breath.

Let's stop this, he thought. Between wound and sickness, and the emotional instability brought on by his resurrected past, he had sure gone into one gloomy downer. Let's set aside the dark thoughts, and start from now to imagine the sparkling mid-summer days.

...Because it's summer, go with everybody to the sea.

Yes, that looks fun, fantastic even.

With Mitsuo, Two Dimensions, Kouko, Linda-senpai and maybe even NANA-senpai. And then, himself. We're going by car. We'll be getting swimsuits ready, buying sandals, raising a ruckus, eager to get together early in the morning. Beach balls. Swim-rings. Coolers. Full of ice and drinks. Not forgetting the towels either. From that, oh yeah, gotta have sun-tan lotion too. And for Kouko, the semi-professional cosmetics she used to make herself look really good.

When he tried to imagine it, he fit in perfectly... at the bottom of the group.

Uncool looking Banri, seemingly happy, playing at the beach with everybody. Messing around at the water's edge, the guys doing back-breakers, watching the groups of women dazzling in their swimwear, eating yakisoba or shaved ice. Shouting out "It's hot, it's hot!" or whatever he pleased in a loud voice, playing the part of a carefree college student to the fullest, Tada Banri was rejoicing under the sun of his nineteenth summer.

---But, that fellow.

Indeed, he wondered about that himself.

By himself in the cool darkness, it felt as if eyes were opened.

As his self yesterday and his self now were clearly "different", he wondered if his current self and his self at the sea would not also be different. Was is possible to deny that such a thing could be? He was such an unstable guy, having changed so much in just one evening.

And like that, he was still watching his present self become his past self, and then his "next" current self come to glorious life... sort of.

He could do no more than that, it seemed.

Under the towel blanket, not even his fingertips could move, as if they were frozen.

Even being like this moment by moment, he felt as if his living self was dying little by little. And then it would be as if he were reborn, he thought. Throwing off his dead self, and then, leaving it behind.

Banri did not know whether the self that thought it was being maintained was even the same as the self of just a moment before. His past self was not raising so much as a resentful voice, perhaps simply letting it pile up at his feet. He was, perhaps, just watching, his eyes open. At this, at me. His voice not reaching me from his place apart.

He was totally lacking in self-confidence.

To Banri, it did not seem at all likely that tomorrow's self could be the same as today's.

* * *

---He woke up.

His room was dimly lit.

It seemed he had dozed off without noticing it. He wondered just how long he had slept. He didn't even know if it was dawn or dusk.

Having lost his sense of time, Banri looked around helplessly. The lights were turned off and the curtains opened, and light from the streetlamps outside lit the inside of his room dimly and vaguely.

It was quiet.

The shadows of the empty stools reached across the flooring.

Near the end of those shadows, there were bare toes.

The whole set of toes was connected to a pair of lower legs, then to knees, and finally to the hem of a one-piece dress.

He realized it was Kouko.

Seated as if she were a doll, her legs stretched out straight, her back against the wall, Kouko was alone and downcast.

Her finely chiseled features lit by an oddly strong whitish light, he saw that she was playing with her cell-phone. Strands of her long hair spilling down over her shoulders and cheeks, her mouth weakly open, her defenses were down. With an expression less than perfect, it looked to Banri as if Kouko had no idea he was watching her.

...Which reminded him, had he not once before awoken and discovered Kouko in his room like this?

Banri didn't speak, didn't even move. He continued to gaze at Kouko's form.

Oh yeah, that was it. It was the night Kouko had been dumped by Mitsuo and had gotten desperate. They'd gone to the live show and gotten drunk. That noisy day back in spring was even nostalgic now.

The gently tapering bridge of her nose was beautiful, her downcast profile illuminated by the cool light.

In his thoughts, Banri wondered why.

That time, and then now too, Kouko seemed strangely like himself. Not that their physical appearances matched at all. Looking, he realized they had no common features. In the first place, she was wearing a skirt which hung down low, and even for a woman, her face was remarkably pretty.

And yet Kaga Kouko was passing time alone in his room, unknowning, helpless, just an anonymous young person like that--- in other words, like himself. It couldn't help but seem such a trifling existence.

If nobody was telling you 'You exist', 'I can see you' or 'I can hear your voice', if simply continuing to exist is difficult, and it appears that your life is about ready to fall apart at any moment, then it couldn't help but be so.

And so Banri...

"Kaga-san"

...called her.

She twitched. He wondered if she was surprised. In the light, her beautifully upturned eyelashes trembling, she looked into Banri's eyes where he lay, still on the bed.

"...Are you awake?"

"Yes. What time is it now? Did I fall asleep or something?"

"Err..."

The light wasn't turned in the room, neither was the television. In the quiet, thin gloom, while clearing her throat, Kouko crept over to his bed-side on her knees.

"Here, look, it's already past seven o'clock."

She turned her cell-phone screen towards him and showed it to him. He shut his eyes dazzled, and so wasn't able to see the time. But he was surprised. Even though it was after dark, he'd thought it was around five o'clock.

"Seven o'clock...? Eh, you're kidding... really?"

"Yep. You slept right through. Did you have any dreams?"

"None at all."

"Well, you slept pretty deeply. Your condition has gotten a little better, though."

"...Now that you mention it, my dizziness is strangely gone... eh, Kaga-san, were you perhaps here the whole time? What about the others?"

"They left around noon. Hey, is there anything you need? Some water to drink?"

"No, I'm fine. Or rather..."

Sitting up a little, Banri looked at Kouko's face. Practically by reflex, a smile came to Kouko's beautiful face. Even though there was no way she couldn't be tired, he thought.

How long had Kouko stayed like that, the television turned off, playing with her cell-phone while staying by his side? Even after everybody else had left.

By his side the whole time.

In a fraction of a second, it felt as if a drop of hot water had fallen on his heart.

Matching his fretfulness, it felt like a ball of flame licking him all the way down to his stomach. It was a friend Banri already knew well.

Whenever he was touched by Kouko's devotion, he became like this.

He could not help but love the person before his eyes. It seemed to him that becoming hopelessly emotional like this, as if wanting to break out in tears, was due to such feelings being

too much for him to handle. Not knowing how he should show them, unable to keep them inside a single heart, Banri had turned into a wavering blockhead. He could not do anything right.

Still, as much as she stayed by his side, he was lonely. He knew that if she held his hand it would comfort him. If she were to give him a hug and a kiss, he'd be even more comforted... that much he knew. It was incredible, barely to be endured, only tolerating deception in small amounts, a volume of love so great as to be painful.

---Even like this, even in this changed 'now', it was so.

Each time he looked at Kaga Kouko. Each time, he was a newborn cell, just then, that instant, opening its eyes. Each time, he was thinking lovingly of the woman he had met.

And yet.

What the heck, really. As if he wanted to pull his bangs from his scalp, he ripped the coldpack from his forehead. It had long since returned to room temperature.

Even though he felt like this, even though he was truly here, even though he wanted to return, and had said that he wanted to, it wasn't "this place" . . . not at all.

He gasped in amazement. It was as if that bit of Kouko-flame he had just gulped down had burned his lungs. Hot and painfully, each cell was being torn apart.

There was nothing he could do about it. No matter how hard he tried. Struggling, squirming, he just couldn't sort out his feelings. It didn't even seem like he could sort them out in time order. How had he wound up like this? And who the heck was to blame?

Somehow or another, he looked into Kouko's eyes. Kouko was there by Banri's side, silently waiting for Banri to do or say something.

"...I'm fine. I really am. ...Sorry about that, but are you okay for time?"

"I'm good!"

"Have you eaten? Ah, have you, perhaps, not eaten anything at all?"

"Yes, I'm fine. I've eaten a bread Linda-senpai gave me. I should be the one saying sorry."

When Kouko apologized, Banri looked back at her blankly, his mouth hanging open stupidly. Even if I have a reason to apologize, there is no reason why you should apologize to me.

"Wh, why? What for?"

"Because. ...We barged in here when you were sick, we couldn't take care of you, and made so much noise... There was no way you could rest. Stupid me should not have come; it would have

been better if hadn't been there."

In contrast to her timid sounding words, Kouko raised her chin, pursed her lips and narrowed both eyes as if she were challenging him to a fight.

But, the present Banri understood perfectly that it was just a big bluff.

"It wasn't like that."

The roses still placed by his bedside smelled sweetly. There wasn't a vase in this room.

"Was too."

"Nope."

"It was too. ...Even though I want to be a ‘good girl'. I can't do anything right. I'm a complete piece of junk."

"That's not at all true!"

Coming from his weakened body, it seemed the strongest of voices. However,

"...I am so!"

Talking back even then, Kouko wouldn't stop punishing herself. Smiling without meaning, pointing at her white, beautiful face,

"I had thought that somehow, really. ...That I could be, more than I am now, certainly, perhaps, a person much more like Linda-senpai."

He couldn't let her keep on talking like this.

Banri took Kouko's wrist, and pulled her towards him as if he were going to shake her hard. He wanted to tell her somehow, "That's wrong, that's wrong!"

Kouko's skin was cool, as if it had been brushed by fresh flowers, and seemed like it would melt under his own feverish palm.

She was silent, holding her breath. Her balance destroyed by Banri's tug, she had come to lean over Banri's upper body.

He was looking at her eyes, trembling in confusion, at point blank range.

They were blinking over and over again as if they were worried, those eyes. After a bit, her composure returning, her long eyelashes turned up. The smell of her hair lightly tickled Banri's nose.

Kouko remained silent, as if there was nothing wrong, even though her wrist was being held, even pulled, in that gloomy room with just the two of them there, with such a companion as he.

Not saying a thing, it was as if she was waiting to know what Banri wanted to do, what he would try to do. Not even moving, Kouko quietly studied the color of Banri's eyes.

---What the heck was it?

"Tada, kun...?"

Kouko's slim wrist looked beyond delicate, such that even such a useless guy as himself could break it off if he gave it any real effort.

"...Tada-kun..."

All at once, Banri let go the breath he had been holding.

He released all five fingers.

Those fingers trembled as if creaking, and from his throat came a matching laugh.

"...Kaga-san, are you sure you're okay...?"

His groaning voice sounded as if he had been crying.

He suspected he didn't sound very smooth. Nonetheless, he wanted to ask her.

Are you sure you're okay with this, associating with such an incomplete person as me, of uncertain meaning, incomprehensible, as if half-broken, half a phantom?

To his point of view, it was certainly not okay.

I don't know for myself who will be here tomorrow.

And because of that, you should flee far from me.

Banri wanted to say all that. But Kouko was smiling.

"Are you okay?"

If it's me, of course.

The time, and my stomach too. Everything, okay.

A perfect, beautiful smile bursting out from her face, she took hold of the hand he had once released. Her cool, soft, gentle fingertips touched the curve of his forehead, as if checking him.

"...You're still hot, aren't you? Getting hurt like this when you're living on your own makes you anxious, doesn't it? But you're okay, so there. There's nothing much this useless piece of junk woman can do, but... I have love, more than anyone else. If nothing else, I can be by your side. I'll do whatever I can."

Before long, with a definite weight behind them, his eyelids fell shut.

It was good he couldn't see anything; if it's scary even crying is okay. As if you could say it like that.

However limitlessly nice she was, seeming so self-sacrificing it was scary, Banri felt that this was plainly a game of chicken.

Would they be able to show their love for each other without fail, however dangerous the situation? Could they expose their true selves to danger? Could they do what was right without hope? Could they give of themselves unstintingly? It was an overly painful competition, like a race to cut yourself just short of the nerves. Nothing less than such a thing was being done to his current self. All of a sudden, she had one-sidedly started it.

Kouko has no responsibility in this though. She has no reason to be in a hurry for pain. She should simply love the appropriate partner, be loved by her partner and be somebody who wears beautiful clothing, beautiful shoes and laughs beautifully. She is a woman who should only be thinking about becoming happy and doing things at their proper time. Kaga Kouko.

The way things are, if "Tada Banri" wouldn't just drop by...

"Hey, Tada-kun. About me."

Little by little, Banri's body heat, like warm water, warmed the hand with which she covered his eyes. Gently, Banri covered that hand with both of his own. Putting strength into all ten fingers, he pressed her soft hand against his pathetic, ugly face.

Clinging to her.

As if begging for help, as if begging for forgiveness, he held tightly to Kouko's white hand. Kouko accepted it quietly.

"It just occurred to me. We want to go to the sea, don't we? ...Let's just go, you and I, without the others. Just the two of us, do you want to do it? Once you feel better, could you take me there with you?"

Banri heard those words in his ears.

A soft fragrance rose from her hands. Her voice resonated deeply in the still darkness.

"Really? You want to go with me, together?"

"Yes. I want to go. It doesn’t have to be Paris. I want to go with you."

"...That so? I understand. That's good."

"Really? Is that a promise?"

"Yes. I promise. I will take you to the sea. It's summer, isn't it? Let's go. I'll do the planning. We'll have fun for sure!"

He could tell from the shaking that off where he couldn't see, Kouko was laughing. By the same signs, it seemed she was nodding.

If he could keep his promise, Kouko would laugh like this--- she could not help but be happy. And if that was the case, he thought, what else was there to do but keep it?

But though he was inclined to think that, he wondered if the right thing to do was to release her hand at once. That too he understood.

But, he still couldn't do that. After all, it was Kouko's smiling face that he desired. He grinned when he pictured himself trying to satisfy such a desire. It was truly disgusting. He wondered, what am I grinning about?

Hmph, thought Banri.

Right now, he detested himself, his own flesh, his very life. It wasn't something fuzzy or vague feelings of anxiety or fear. Clearly, he was hating himself as a target he wanted to destroy, to erase its existence.

His very body seemed as if it were some sort of germ, soaking into and defiling Kouko's beautiful skin from the moment she touched him. He was disagreeable and repulsive. He wondered, if he managed to be tossed aside, then to what extent would his heart, his soul, come to be at peace?

Kouko's warm, slim hands, covering his eyelids gently, slid smoothly along his cheeks, though if they had pressed against his throat, that would be okay too. He supposed he could think of such things calmly because it was absolutely impossible for such a gentle woman to do such things, and because he understood that perfectly. But he didn't like being in that situation either.

He was in pieces already; a wreck.

Since he could not hope for his lover to do the favor of strangling him, he held his own breath, having no choice but to silence himself. He wondered if by doing like that for a little while, he might sink alone into the abyss.

Still as uncomprehending as a person could be, his eyes and throat hurt so much he could cry. Naturally, his injured lip hurt too.

He was also aware that he was completely trapped in the so-called 'honey pot' of human life.

* * *

Banri contemplated the greatness of everyday things.

Even though it may have seemed you were peeking at the end of the world in despair, through a gun barrel, the sun rises once more, the summer morning so pure white it brought you back to life. It appeared that a single person's problems had no influence over the world.

Before the everyday noises start up, he opened his eyes refreshed and when he tried to get up from bed, found his fever had gone down, and that his nineteen year old body wanted nothing but calories.

Taking care for his wounded lip, Banri slurped nattō.

Nattō met all of his requirements: he had it in the refrigerator, it was nutritious, he could eat it without chafing his mouth, and it was something that didn't require much chewing. He tried one pack, and finding it okay, he went for it and slurped down all three packs he had bought. Sitting quietly on a stool, hunched forward, he ate it straight from the pack. Halfway through, he looked at all the shapes. As they were, without rice, he didn't think for an instant they were monstrous: it was nattō after all. It was healthy. To this extent, it was well suited to Japanese genes, though perhaps for other people's bodies not so much so. Casting off his doubts, as he was, wreathed in the morning light, Banri ran through the remainder of the three packs all in one go, slurping them as if they were noodles.

...When he told Kouko about it,

"My little brother's closet."

Her answer was rather strange.

Or rather, he didn't get it, but,

"The closet is quiet, and it somehow smells of nattō."

Such a look on Kouko's face was by no means a sign of pleasure. Shrugging her shoulders as if she wanted to say "whatever",

"Are you wondering why that?"

"Eh... he hides... in the closet... to eat... nattō?"

"Boo, you missed. The answer was gym clothes. That kid would forget to toss his dirty gym clothes in the laundry. He'd just stuff them into his closet and leave them there. A young man's body odor decomposes before long, turning into an odor a lot like nattō. I can track it down with this nose of mine without any doubt. I mean, Tada-kun, you know, if your little brother hid himself in the closet to eat nattō, wouldn't that be a big deal? Something you don't see every day?"

"...If you knew the answer, why'd you ask me?"

"It's a side-ways conversational technique. Sometimes mixing up questions will stimulate conversation. I saw it on the net."

Kouko tilted her head to the side proudly, with a perfect smile looking up at Banri beside her. And like that, she squeezed the hand of her lover, her fingers tightly entwined with his. Having such a thing done to him, Banri was drained of strength too.

"That sooo!?"

"Looks like it to me!"

"Now I get it!"

"Do you!?"

Nyow I get it! Nya-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha~! ...They couldn't help but laugh like a pair of love birds.

The rhythm of every day, so to speak, was a truly great thing.

While they continued to goof around together... *You little~, Kyaa~, Standoffish~, No way~...* Banri thought that once more. Sleep, and the morning sun. Having to go to school. Other people coming and going. So long as one is alive, there are instinctive desires that you cannot avoid. Societal masks required of you. Ways to ensure you cannot move. All of these might be a system to help you forget.

Precisely because of things like that, precisely because morning follows night, he wondered that humankind, their huge brains bulging with concerns, could carry out their social lives pretending not to notice things.

If he were by himself, brooding silently, anywhere in the black night could seem depressing. But now, like this, he couldn't feel anything of the sort. The brightness of the sun shone on everybody's face equally. Plainly, things like the night were nothing to it. And so, everybody crawls out of bed and sets off, their faces pretending not to have noticed.

The third period over, the crowd of noisy students left, mixing through the gray law department lobby.

Banri and Kouko, leaving the same lecture, as always a party of two, walked along, forming part of that crowd. As boyfriend he was, perhaps, not impartial, but to him Kouko shone brilliant and dazzling amidst that dark crowd, as if basking in her own spotlight.

"But there couldn't be that much smell left from your little brother's nattō! In other words, it even leaked out from his room? Enough so that you found out about the gym clothes in the closet?"

"No, it never got that bad. I went and inspected my little brother's closet at regular intervals."

"At regular intervals? Inspections? ...Of your little brother's closet?"

"What of it?"

"...Why would you do such a thing?"

"What has that kid been doing lately? As his older sister, I have to check it out. So he isn't hiding strange things, right? I mean, after all, it's an expression of family love. But if he does, then he's getting it!"

Making a sound strangely like some sexy foreign chick, Kouko raised her chin defiantly. Following the smooth line from her neck, it was very beautiful, but,

"Besides the gym clothes smelling like nattō, there was a suspicious DVD hidden amongst the clothes! So, tossing the gym clothes into the washing machine, I took the DVD (which really looked like it had been watched) and placed it on top of the topmost chest in the living room, right out in front, right where it could be seen. Good spot, eh? Right next to the Warhol drawing."

An execution, was the phrase that came to Banri's mind. Quite a devilish thing to do.

"...Didn't your brother get mad?"

"He didn't get mad, but he always watches me darkly."

"...By the way, what was the DVD about?"

"The title was 'Lesbian-esque Trap.' Hey, is that normal? Did the boys in high school all seem to be interested in 'lesbian-esque'? Now, whenever I'm told I'm "-esque" about something, is Shizuka thinking secretly, 'Is my big sister... a lesbian-esque trap?'"

"Yes, well, how to put it...? That guy's got a bottomless pit for a stomach, right? Perhaps he's a maniac with great potential?"

Recently, guys fiddling with their smart phones with their fingers, earphones in their ears, oblivious to all the world, were springing up all over campus. Banri and Kouko, their hands

joined to the inconvenience of others, were being bumped into mercilessly by them.

"Ouch!"

"Watch out, Tada-kun, are you okay? I mean, if they're quiet and don't care to look up, shouldn't you be a little more aware of your surroundings... ouch!"

"Oops, what about you, are you okay? I mean, for the time being, shouldn't you not be entering your little brother's room without permission, for each other's sake... uff!?

"No way, that guy just now was really danger... kyaa!"

The poster affixed on the wall "Be Careful: Repeated Accidents" wasn't very effective.

Having been run into by four people in a row, Banri and Kouko hurriedly grabbed each other's hand and took refuge by the wall. Using her fingertips to brush up the forelocks which had fallen to her forehead, "Jeez!" said Kouko, as she raised her beautifully drawn brown eyebrows.

"What's with that!? Can't they see the pitiful state you're in!? People ought to pay a little more attention!"

"Right!?" She said in a sweet voice, wanting his agreement. Banri shrugged his shoulders lightly.

As far as he was concerned, there was no particular reason for the guys passing by to pay special attention to the bandages on a guy's mouth. Plus, he had thought from the very start that clinging to each other in a crowded campus was a particularly troublesome way to be. And more than that, more than anything, that big-sister style execution by Kouko had angered him for some reason. Knowing no more than his name "little brother Shizuka (pet cat Genghis Khan... no, Bibimbap)", he couldn't help but sympathize with him, from the bottom of his heart. He was a guy with big-sister troubles. And since they were blood-related, there was no way for him to escape.

As he was thinking of such things,

"Heey, Tada Banri & Robo-girl!"

From a place a bit apart, a voice with a certain style called out to the two of them. Once they looked, they saw three Omaken third-years over on the other side, Kosshii-senpai waving his hand as to say "Hurry up and get over here." At being invited over by the senior the two of them automatically bowed their heads lightly while,

"...Robo-girl?"

Kouko muttered, "Am I 'Robo-girl'? But why?" Her voice was as if she were groaning deep inside her throat, and she had her head tilted to one side.

The name "Golden Robo-Girl" had already become firmly established amongst the Omaken upperclassmen, but had not yet sunk into the person herself, it seemed.

The Omaken meeting was in its usual place again today. They held it in one corner of the law school building lobby, at a table and some benches arranged by the bulletin board on the wall.

Kosshii-senpai was seated lightly, and next to the bench was Linda.

Even though Banri and Kouko were coming over, she recognized them with a smile and called "Yo!"

"Tada Banri, your fever's already gone down?

Her ankles peeking out the bottom of her girlish cargo-pants, and she wore a simple jersey, but her usual fighting spirit just wasn't there. With a manner as if he were meeting a handsome, nameless cat at a street-corner, Banri showed Linda a playful grin and,

"Yup, thanks to you! Thank you very much! I slept the whole night like a dead thing, and this morning felt just like new!"

While Banri worried about his split lip, she returned the smile with the same expression.

But casually, her gaze followed the headlines of the sports news, which somebody had laid out on the top of the table. She wasn't reading the content, of course. She simply followed the rows of text, deliberately fixing her vision there.

Banri felt she should wake up, that she should be made to get up.

It should be as it had been until now, not thinking nor feeling anything, normal, unchanging. If it were only for himself, he wouldn't change the situation at all. And then, once it was all forgotten and things calmed down, that would be best. But he had no choice.

With that Banri beside him.

"Really, it's all because of you, Linda-senpai. Thank you very much. Today Tada-kun wolfed down his lunch, so he's recovered already. See?"

While she entwined her fingers with his, Kouko glued herself to Banri and looked up at his face like a spoiled child. It wasn't like Kouko was saying "Linda, how do you like this?" but Banri automatically tried to push her fingers away, feeling awkward with her flirting with him in front of the regular upperclassmen.

"It's okay, you know."

She smiled, one eyebrow raised.

Determined, Kouko wouldn't let go of his fingers. It was a little troublesome, but he wasn't going to force the issue. While looking at Banri's face bewildered, Kouko kept up a shining smile.

Today's Kouko was again perfectly beautiful.

In her elegantly wound, long hair, a silk scarf with a bold pattern served instead of a hair-band. The frills attached to her no-sleeve ribbon-tied blouse were blue. The summer-like white and tight mini-skirt and flesh-colored strap-sandals with nine-centimeter heels were pushing her feminine style to the uttermost limits. The gloss on her smiling lips had a surprisingly deep cherry color. A brand-name, beige colored bag slung from her shoulder, that model-like form was, of course, Kaga Kouko!

"Dude"

"He's no 'dude'."

Popcorn being tossed at him by the Omaken upperclassmen, he had no choice but to wriggle out of the way in a strangely erotic way. Even so, most of it hit Banri in the face.

"Once you're all done playing around, please sit down."

At Kosshii-senpai's urging, Kouko's hand finally let go of his. Seating himself next to Linda, he received a printout being passed around. Looking it over briefly,

"Whoa... at last, it's our debut!"

Banri raised his voice without thinking.

The printout that was handed to him detailed the main points about Omaken's debut presentation for the year, at a large suburban shopping district's Awa Odori celebration.

It had already been decided that right after the start of summer vacation, Banri and the other Omaken members would be going up alongside some other large dancing groups.

Clearing his throat lightly, Kosshii-senpai caught their attention and started to speak.

"Just a few words. Everybody, you aren't to lose the printout you just received until after we're done. It has the schedule and times, what clothing and footwear to use, what accessories you will need, which is now your responsibility to prepare. And then, we will have to practice just how we will dance together. In fact, with only two practices to go, we will only just make it."

Everybody raised their voices in dismay. Banri too. The schedule was tighter than he'd thought.

"No whining. That's the Wednesday after next. So it's already crunch time."

The older girls showed their nervousness with "Crap! This is bad! Are you serious?" For their

part, the older guys were only talking about "Where's the wrap party? What're we going to be doing? We'd better make reservations early!"

"Well, since we'll be dancing in groups, it shouldn't be that hard. Linda and I will be leading, though we might wind up feeling like we stand out a bit."

Seated cross-legged, Linda, making a pose as if she were bowing lightly, raised her hand in salute, signaling her agreement with Kosshii-senpai. Kouko looked over at Linda's face, questioning.

"'Feeling like you stand out'... has anything happened?"

"You could say that. And that's because Kosshi-senpai and I have to go out before the group a lot, directing from out front, using that position so we can all work together in unison. In fact, our costumes will be a bit fancier than yours."

"Eh, incredible! It'll be like that!? Wow... And since Linda-senpai's dance really is beautiful, then it will surely be great, won't it..."

Linda laughed softly at Kouko's ecstatic muttering.

"Would you switch with me?"

Though anybody else would have understood this as a joke,

"Kyaa!"

...Speaking of which, he wondered what kind of reaction that was.

It seemed that to the mind of everybody present came a vision of Kaga Kouko in the form of a golden robot, head thrown back in a shriek, doing the same shaking robot dance as before. If she were out in front of the group, standing out like that... laughter broke out from all around. Banri and the older guys wound up laughing loudly, and yet,

"Do your best, Linda!"

"Yo!"

At the edge of his vision.

He had seen Kosshii-senpai and Linda tap their fists together softly. It was clearly a crude greeting between comrades. But he knew they weren't so close from the start. After all, we were close friends long ago, with many shared friends from before. Things like that are okay. But with second and third year college students, it shouldn't be possible to develop such a close friendship. Or rather.

---Apart from that.

Thought Banri, looking away.

Apart from that, feelings don't happen without a reason. Apart from that, there is nothing. Nothing at all. There's nothing to think about.

Only, he saw in passing, Kosshii-senpai's arm, stretching out from his T-shirt. That straight reach, the masculine, angular joints, the thick, tense sinews which made his own as nothing.

He was thinking of nothing but nothingness.

The meeting over, the upperclassmen one by one got up to leave. Trying to follow after them, Banri hurriedly grabbed his bag too and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

As if it were only natural, Kouko tried to follow him, but,

"Excuse me, wait a bit!"

And having said that, he ran off by himself.

Catching up with the four guys who left first, he tugged on the sleeve of Kosshii-senpai's T-shirt.

"Err, Senpai?"

"Oh? What's up, Tada Banri? What a girly way to get my attention. Haven't you got the wrong kind of crush?"

"You wanna play mahjongg too? Shall we all go together?"

"Well, I've got something I need to talk with you about... would it be okay if we chat while we walk?"

"No problem. What's up, what's going on?"

Walking leisurely alongside the upperclassmen, Banri opened his mouth hesitantly.

"...Err... about, my girlfriend..."

"Robo-girl?"

"Yes, I've promised to... take Robo-girl to the seaside, but in a practical sense, what do you think would be a good plan? If we aren't going to my home region, then I have no idea where we

should go, and I can't rely on my friends, as they all lack experience as well..."

"Yes, that's right. First of all, to make sure she doesn't rust in the salty sea breeze, you will have to blow like crazy over Robo-girl's entire body."

While he answered him back with a bright smile, Kosshii-senpai ground his fist into Banri's side near his liver.

"Ow ow ow ow ow!"

Banri was surrounded in the blink of an eye on the undergraduate building's outer steps by four upperclassmen, laughing and saying "Hahaha, give him a little more, Kosshii."

"We mean, there's not much fun in this for us!"

"Look at his face and judge for yourself!"

"Will you be staying overnight? Hm!? One night!? Eh!?"

He was being attacked mercilessly. Yet,

"Sta, stay overnight...eh!? Why do you think it will turn out like that!?"

"What's with these guys now?" he thought, as they stepped more and more mercilessly on the toes of his Jack Purcells. Both his feet being crushed and ground against, Banri could only raise a sorrowful cry.

"You must think you want to stay there overnight! Like it was nothing! Going to the beach, her long hair flying all over the place, her proud skin showing too... by the time you get back to the beach inn to take your showers, it'll be a wonder if you two young people will be able to control yourselves!"

"'Robo-girl, there's no way we're going to make it back to the inn as we are!"

"'I want to take a good shower! I want to get into a hot bathtub! I'm tired, and I want to take a break!'"

"...Don't go. If you're tired and sleepy, this is the perfect place. The place to spend the night..."

"...Yep. Looks like the place."

"That, like this, right now..."

"What're you saying, all on your own like that!?"

Heey! Banri flapped his feet around, brushing off the upperclassmen's shoes. Besides, things like

that were blasphemous in regards to Kouko.

And yet, even though he thought it was blasphemous,

---'It doesn’t have to be Paris.'

"..."

As if to shake off the remembered voice in an instant, he shook his head sharply side to side.

The remnant of the sweet, low, husky voice in his ears reminded him of the night. He shouldn't be remembering it in broad daylight on campus, and besides, exploring the meaning of those words would make him look incredibly shabby to himself. Apart from that, was he even sure there was any meaning at all? Just because it didn't have to be in Paris for now, saying 'Where do I want to go? Oh yeah, I want to go to the sea', was saying only that much.

...But, it might. Maybe the meaning... to put it simply... no, no no no no.

"...You bunch of sleeze-balls. You upperclassmen have your minds in the gutter. Please stop looking at Kaga-san like that. It's a violation."

His plain face, lately a notch brighter, was being made more and more angry. Banri glared at each of the upperclassmen's faces in turn as he shouted. Squealing high-spiritedly in falsetto voices, the upperclassmen pretended to start running away in exaggerated slow motion.

"What's with those voices? Besides, I don't want to ask about such things. More like, under normal circumstances... what kinds of places are good to go to!? What routes should I take!? I was asking about things along those lines. And in spite of that, you guys going disgustingly delusional and not at all trustworthy. I'm disappointed in you already!"

"Yeah, yeah. How about a train?"

"You got a driver's license?"

"...Neither of them. My feet are my only train."

Phew... Suddenly the upperclassmen's expressions changed. Folding their arms as one, they surrounded Banri in thought. Kosshii-senpai muttered seriously.

"Going to the beach by train is painful."

All of them nodded.

"For sure. Guys, I'm not sure that a healthy young lady would like the feel of a place like that. You would be taking a high-heeled princess along with you on a train ride early in the morning, not knowing whether you will be seated or not, and on the way back you'd be sandwiched in

with a bunch of salarymen. Your sandals gritty with sand. Smelling of salt. You might find middle or high schoolers there, but not many college students."

"You might be all right with it, but for Robo-Girl it would probably be mortifying."

"Now, let's show you the essence of 'slumming it.'"

"Yes, but the result would probably be 'Robo-Girl, I was afraid of this, but it won't work. I'm not good enough for you.'"

Watching the upperclassmen's faces nod together 'Yes, yes, true, true,' Banri had few words. Frozen with a stupid look on his face,

"What... the..."

He could only groan.

"For your information, it seems that Hosshii-senpai and his girlfriend of last year took the plunge and stayed a night in Atami. The cost for the two of them passing the night in what seemed a good looking adult hot springs hotel, going there and back in a bullet train and with this and that, came out close to 100,000 yen. Well, she's his former girlfriend now, since they broke up that fall. Even though they were half living together."

"Ah, it was, it was. It certainly was."

"Hosshii made a lot of noise about that time, but it was a total waste."

"Though now for some other reason he's going to waste. He told me the other day he was wondering if he'd have to repeat the year."

"For real?"

Confronted by his upperclassmen's reflections, as if they were becoming job searching warriors, their minds and bodies half destroyed, Banri himself was uneasy.

For Atami, one hundred thousand. Though for somebody from Shizuoka it was somehow or other, for once, a comforting name.

"So, Tada Banri. Have you got money?"

Kosshii-senpai seemed to have remembered Banri's existence.

"Eh. ...I've nothing... of course."

"Well, with no way to get there, nor any money, you've not got much choice. Then shouldn't you start earning money at once? You got a job?"

"...I haven't..."

"Don't give me 'haven't'! You'd better go get one, seriously."

"For sure. If you let such a girl get away, you could spend your whole life and not find another so pretty."

"Work like your life depends on it!"

"Go for it desperately!"

"You don't really look like somebody who's working really hard."

"Yep. I was thinking the same."

"I know what you mean. You might think you're working hard, but there's no point if you don't show her that."

"That's right, that may become important for me in such things as job hunting."

"Show her you're a man, Tada Banri."

"You have to do that every now and then."

Suddenly surrounded in all directions by upperclassmen, their faces serious, in preaching mode, Banri was cornered. Having gotten to where he could say nothing more, he touched the bandage by his mouth with his fingertip. He tried to say he was a wounded person, still recovering from his wounds, but no words came out.

At that moment, over past Kosshii-senpai's envious and macho-looking shoulders, he spotted the white face of a bored looking Kouko, standing by herself quietly waiting for Banri. Her solitary form seemed anxious, and looked lonely. It reminded him of how sad she had been that spring when they met.

Wait just a little bit more. It's because I want to gather some hints for the sake of your happiness. So just a little more... thought Banri, looking at her sidelong, when for some reason Kosshii-senpai,

"Haa... everybody hold on! Sheesh! It looks like something's made this guy cry!"

Saying things like that. When he realized he was being called a sissy, Banri got even more resentful.

* * *

"You can't."

Saying it sharply, but with a smile, Kouko had her head tilted slightly, to the perfect angle.

"You can't! You can't get something like a part-time job."

Why was she telling him such things specially? Her gaze very much seemed to want to say something, going from side to side, back and forth, as if comparing Banri's left and right eyes.

At lunchtime the school cafeteria had been almost completely full, and even now, later in the afternoon, there were still students scattered here and there.

There were some guys who seemed to be eating lunch very late by themselves, and many seats were occupied by people just sitting here and there talking.

Banri and Kouko were seated in a less popular area, at the corner of a wide table, their chairs pulled together on purpose.

"Yeah, but..."

"You can't. The time we have together has gotten too short. That absolutely cannot be. I simply cannot permit it. It's impossible."

Indeed, from an outsider's perspective they were plainly a couple, their faces close together, "doing as they pleased." Kouko's knee was touching the denim on Banri's knee. Kouko had her elbow on the table, her upper body slightly inclined, and from Kouko's breast there arose the sweet smell of roses. Even if it was only from her seductive body heat, it was making Banri's face dizzy, and yet,

"...No. It's not impossible."

He said it flatly, and ripped his gaze away from her white breast. Right now, right here, he could not afford to be unable to think. The upperclassmen had told him just now to be a man.

Seeing Banri's face like that, Kouko pursed her dark cherry lips. When she did so, a soft 'nooo...' escaped her lips. Are you Raoh?

"But look, I promised to take you to the beach. In order to do that, I need money."

"Can't it be my treat?"

"No, I just said I really am critically short of pocket money. I think it's normal for students to

have part-time jobs."

"Aren't I not working?"

"But you're from a rich family."

"...And if they raised your allowance?"

"Won't happen. As it is, they're giving me all they can. I can't ask my parents for more."

"But, what can't be done can't be done! I absolutely won't allow it! I don't want a job to cut into our date time!"

"That's rather selfish..."

"But! ...Well, let's do this. I'll take you with me. OK? That'd be good, right? Isn't that good? It's settled!"

'That', in other words was... 'let's go, my treat.' Something like that.

Could there be a more pathetic story than this? Well, could there be? Normally it would be impossible.

Having lost the words that should follow, Banri awkwardly scratched his head. Oh, really? Well then, this time your treat! He wasn't a guy to give in like that.

Apart from feeling a little guilty inside, for perhaps the first time he could remember, he was simply a guy who badly wanted to save face.

...Thinking about such things one by one, it seemed he already had a guilty conscience. As if he had suddenly fallen into a place or situation he could not understand, he felt as if he were another person, gawking at himself in amazement.

(Uuuhhh)

And.

(What'cha doing, Tada Banri?)

It was as if his unconscious had been ripped out and set outside next to him.

Returning to himself,

"...ngh..."

...It was all in an instant. It certainly felt like he'd returned to himself.

All of a sudden his back went cold. Sensing a really dangerous other presence, he broke out in drops of sweat.

What the heck was that just now, he wondered.

He wondered what he had been doing, spaced out like that.

Sneaking up on him to launch an attack without him even realizing it, Kouko, her wide, upturned eyes sparkling without restraint, glittering while she came closer to him,

"Hey, what were you thinking just now?"

"...Eh?"

She was slowly tracing around her tender looking lips with the tip of a very attractive fingernail. And she was laughing in a sweet, nasal voice.

Kouko's nails today were a pearlish light white. Lightly splashed on the tips only was a emerald green and silver lame, giving the impression of tropical fish scales sparkling brilliantly at the bottom of the sea. There was also a pretty ring of delicate lacework set on her slender finger.

Gazing at Banri's eyes, absentmindedly staring at the movements of those fingertips,

"From the very start, have you understood?"

Kouko's piercing eyes suddenly looked into his.

They gazed at each other in mutual incomprehension.

In that instant, feeling as if she could see just about everything about him, Banri's heart skipped a beat.

He had a feeling that at any moment, from Kouko's lips would be coming the words "I know that Tada-kun has changed..."

What will I do if that happens? What should I do? If she asked like that... what lie should he tell?

The inside of his mouth suddenly went dry, and he regretted terribly not having brought some of the free tea with him to the table.

However, Kouko's next words,

"I want to spend more time with you. Don't you know that perfectly well? Really, I want to be with you more, more, moooorre. But, because I don't want you to get annoyed, I restrain myself. Aren't you desperate? I'm plenty."

Having been expecting the worst, he found himself in a very different place. He took a breath without realizing, and groaned.

"...Is that... so?"

"Yes, it is. When we are apart, all I do is think of what you are doing, what you are thinking and what you feel about me. Really, I want to stick to you always, totally, 24 hours a day. What you see, what you hear, what you eat, what you feel, I want to know anything and everything. I want to understand, I want to share everything perfectly. But hey, I understand that me being like that could be painful, heavy and irritating. Acting like a stalker can be scary."

Aren't I learning?

Continuing in that way, Kouko showed a perfect smile on her beautiful face. Saying "Yes!" without thinking, Banri nodded exaggeratedly, thereby removing the sting.

"So, if you were working a job, our time would be more limited. Don't you see? Besides that, since it's this time I'm going to say frankly, I don't want you telling me about some girl I don't know that you met while working at some place I don't know. Absolutely, no way. Just imagining it will make my head explode. Or, do you want to see it? My brain, that is."

"...Hey, Kaga-san."

"What's up? Do you want to see? Really?"

"No no no, that's not what I meant."

"If you want to see, shall we take a look?"

"No, seriously, listen."

With Kouko's face drawing closer to his, staring intensely, Banri warded her away lightly with one finger and somehow managed to argue back.

"I terribly regret having to inform you of this, but with regards to your finding value in me as a male of the species, as of this moment you are alone in that."

It's painful to speak of it to this extent, but it is reality.

"Obviously, I am not the kind of guy who drips girls, and from the start the fact that I've been able to go out with you, as far as I am concerned, has been improbable, like a super unreal dream state. It truly is a miracle. And so, being told suddenly you were in shock, and you were afraid of this? I could just laugh. Such worries are really, completely, unnecessary."

The moment Banri stopped talking, Kouko's smile, which until then had been sparkling self-assuredly, suddenly darkened.

In so doing, her gaze, which had been thrust out toward him before, now slowly dropped, trembling, to the table. Letting go of a curl of her softly waving hair that she had wrapped about her finger, she shrugged her shoulders once, up, then down. She seemed to be heaving a long sigh.

At length, she murmured to herself "Why won't you understand?" her voice so soft as to not even have left her mouth.

He wondered if he had hurt her somehow.

Banri peeked over towards the face of the suddenly tense Kouko, trying to find the words he should say, but,

"...I've thought it'd be nice if you became small. About this tall."

She caught on to her smile once more.

Once more regaining her normal perfect expression, Kouko spread her thumb and index finger all of eight inches apart.

"Then, I could set you next to me all the time. Feeding you, putting you to bed, getting you dressed, I would hide and protect you so nobody could see you. To keep you from being stolen, I would take you with me in my purse when I go out. Mirror, gloss and Tada Banri... it would feel like that. And then finally, I want to wrap you up in a sushi roll and eat you!"

"Eh!? Though it is certainly somewhat of a shocking development... well, but unexpected, and not... bad? I will be accepted as delicious, but if I don't get acquainted with even one of your tender skin cells, then perhaps in another life? Even though it's something like the ending of Galaxy Express..."

"What kind of story is 'Galaxy Express'?"

"It's like that! For no particular reason, while I was in the hospital, I read everything there was set around the ward. But they were scattered here and there, different volumes in the middle of series. I haven't spoken in detail because I didn't want to give out spoilers."

"Eeh, no way, I didn't know. It was the kind of story where spoilers become a problem? I was imagining a warm, comfy story with a more romantic mood. Then Giovanni and Campanella got mixed up in the sushi roll?"

"Hm? No, that's not right, it wasn't them. Rather Maetel and Tetsuro."

"Oh, those two!? No way! Tell me straight from the start! Just say it's the 009 story!"

Her cheeks going frighteningly red, Kouko opened her mouth wide with laughter while she pounded Banri on the shoulder, but

"No, no, that's not the right one either!"

I am Kouko... a girl somehow off topic...

At that very moment, as Kouko muttered behind Banri's back, her eyes downcast and lashes fluttering,

"Flirting in broad daylight!"

With what felt like a thump, their ears adjusted to the anime voice.

"Betcha that's Oka-chan!"

Turning their heads, as expected there was Oka Chinami standing there, and,

"No way! Or rather, what the!? What are you doing here!?"

She pointed at her own mouth, then at where gauze had been affixed to Banri's face. As it happened, in Chinami's small hand there was a partially emptied PET bottle of tea. With the bottom of it, she tapped Banri between the shoulder blades.

"Yo, Oka-chan. I fell down at home, my lip got cut and swelled up."

"Eeh! Are you okay!? How'd it happen!? Ah, perhaps..."

Grabbing the cap of the PET bottle as if it were a microphone, she turned towards Kouko. With an evil laugh, turning her head upwards as if she were a child,

"Have you been assaulted?"

"..."

As expressionless and silent as a Noh mask, Kouko snatched the PET bottle from her. Just like that, she struck Chinami on the forehead with the thing. However Chinami, as you might expect, stood her ground. Without even pulling back, as if nothing had happened,

"Wow, that's awful. Was it serious?"

"..."

She had so much to say she wound up babbling. The afterimage was so shocking that Banri could hardly take it in. He took back the bottle from Kouko's hand, and stuffed it snugly back into Chinami's bag while explaining briefly.

"This thing is gonna self-destruct. By itself, when it feels like it, it's going to fall apart."

"Nnyahahahahaa, reallyyy?"

He wondered just what had happened that was so funny. Chinami, at Banri's explanation, was smiling like a cat whose stomach was being rubbed, and yet, their situation. If he spoke of it. Without him realizing it, Banri's eyes became those of a skilled craftsman, having entered into a mode of appreciation.

Finding Chinami doubled over in laughter was a daily occurance... like a demon... no, that didn't suffice to describe her. She was pretty, like a wild demon god or roaring waves.

Crowsfeet drooping softly because of her laughter, her face was surpassingly white and innocent. The texture of her skin was like that of sweet, sticky condensed milk. Her lips were strawberry colored.

Her thick, shiny, jet black hair gathered loosely and falling to her shoulders in the style of a foreign noblewoman, her features clearly those of a doll, her large eyes glittering prettily, as if

moist.

And yet for some reason, there was this strangely spicy, not quite jasmine flower fragrance rising from Chinami’s body. It was incredibly comfortable, and slightly flamboyant.

Banri, without realizing he was enchanted, inhaled a lung-full of her aura, getting high on it. He could not get enough of how Chinami's cuteness always took him away from everything unpleasant about life. She had a natural gift of cuteness, he thought. She was, perhaps, a gift from the gods. A gift of transcendent cuteness. And Chinami passed her allotment freely to the other denizens of this world. He wondered if he had no choice but to open his mouth to the falling drops and receive them as best he could.

She was wearing a somewhat baggy embroidered black-linen blouse like a one-piece dress, and similarly black, skinny jeans. She had on leather sandals, and lacking her usual day-pack today, she carried a traditional woven shopping bag. The back of her neck, her wrists and her ankles, peeking from the black clothing were white, slim, fragile and delicate, giving an effect truly beautiful and especially girly. She had put on one slender bead bracelet, also flesh-colored, looking pretty and sparkly. It had white and mustard beige color scheme, with a contrasting red interspersed. It was conspicuosly beautiful.

Today, to Banri's eyes, the cute demon Chinami's form was like a brave figure crossing through the desert countries, materializing from the blowing sands, their brown particles dancing in the air. She was that dramatic.

Unable to keep from sighing,

"What's with you today, Oka-chan? It feels like you came here riding a horse..."

He gave his impressions. But, it seemed Chinami didn't quite get it.

"Does it? Even though I came here as usual from Kinshichou via JR?"

He could hear Kouko mutter, "You're from Kinshichou? For some reason it got changed to Okachimachi in my head." O-ka-chi-na-mi, oka-chi-ma-chi, ...Kaga Kouko... without thinking the rhythm was coming back to him again, but setting aside the joke for now,

"Adult clothing like that looks better on you than your usual Sai Baba cosplay..."

He continued with his impressions. But, as before, Chinami was puzzled.

"...When have I ever done a Sai Baba cos...?

She was confused about that part. The eyes looking back innocently at Banri were virtually a universe. Flickering stars in eternal darkness. Banri was standing still as if a spell had been cast upon him, as if he had been swallowed whole by Chinami's gaze. She was that pretty. With room left over for seconds.

But the feeling of having room for more wasn't being passed to anybody else here. Banri's arm was grabbed fiercely just below the shoulder and shaken,

"Tada-kun, let's go to a different shop."

Her face taut, Kouko stood up from her chair. Though she said "shop", it was just the cafeteria.

"Look. Ultrasonic here is giving off a lewd, perverted aura."

"Ooh... The day has come when words like 'pervert' come out of Kaga-san's mouth..."

"It's the truth, so it can't be helped. If I had been in a place like that, I would have become that meat-eating flower's victim in no time at all. Ah, was that the meaning of 'the flower below'?"

"Hah, that so!? What the heck!? The 'thing below' was me. Wasn't I about to be caught by the dangerously heaving, meaty blossom's crevices!? Ah, was that the meaning of 'the flower below'?"

"...St, stop with the comedy act. I'm not answering anything more..."

Chinami seemed to be muttering to herself while trying to distance herself from the exceedingly rude couple. Even Banri's over-late attempt at smoothing things over "We're just kidding, it's only a joke" was met with a snort and a peevish turning away from them.

"I mean, it's about time for me to head off to my job too. Take care, take it easy."

She lightly waved her hand. Hearing that Banri automatically,

"Hey, look! Even Oka-chan has a job. Of course it's normal. Everybody does it."

He pointed to Chinami, and turned back towards Kouko's face. Kouko frowned, and Chinami stopped trying to walk away and asked back in curiosity.

"Huh? What's that? What are you talking about?"

"Listen to her! I was thinking about getting a job too, but you won't let me, and are stopping me. I didn't think about Oka-chan having one. Part time jobs are super normal and everybody has one."

"It's super normal! Everybody does it! I mean, our shop is taking applications for part time work. Banri, would you work with me? You want an interview?"

"Eh!? Seriously!?"

"Seriously, seriously..."

The conversation was as fast as lightning. In the seconds it took to state the subject, he'd been invited by Chinami. Kouko was frowning opening, sputtering "Huh!?"

"What kind of job is it!?"

Banri had quickly sunk his teeth into it.

Even so, he absolutely had to get a part time job. He could not do as Kouko had told him. That being so, wasn't it all right to be in the same place, together as his friends? In any case, shouldn't it be okay if he was working with friends, Two Dimensions, Yana-ssan or even Chinami? Wasn't it common sense to think that way? And he still had room left over for seconds.

"It's at the Daikanyama Café."

"Eh! A C-A-F-E!? That's super cool!"

"Well, it's something else. Incredible, in fact. Kinda feels like "T, T, T, TOKYO! S, S, S, SHIBUYA, KUU!" So cool the juice drips from it."

"Ah!? Like how the flower below does!?"

"Didn't I say I wasn't going to answer anymore to that topic!?"

"Wouldn't a fashionable place like not normally hire somebody like me?"

"Well, both of you come and check it out once anyway. I mean, aren't you free now? It you like, would you come with me? Like, a right now kinda thing. If you'd like, Kaga-san too..."

At being invited softly like that,

"What's this 'too'...!?"

Kouko snapped. Stepping up to Chinami,

"Am I going to be treated like just something along for the ride!? Tada-kun and I are two hearts beating as one! I mean, we're on a date after this! You may be the temptress here, but isn't Tada-kun avec moi!? B, O, T, H, O, F, U, S! Get it!? WE! You understand!? With a "W", "II"! Understood!? Have you got it!? Right away! In other words, stay away!"

Looming over the petite Chinami like that, her beautiful face was like a guardian diety.

"Yessir, then won't you come with me? Err, the two of you."

Laughing away as hard she could Chinami's amended invitation as if it were some sort of backdraft, Kouko stood beautifully, like a model, raising her chin haughtily.

"We, can, not. Go. We simply cannot. It's impossible. Could you think things through before you ask something ridiculous? I am not going to let you interfere with the time we have together."

Saying all that while plainly acting the part of the Evil Queen, she turned towards Banri's face and said "Right?"

"Ehh, let's go, Kaga-san."

This was a deliberate stab in the back. Naturally Kouko,

"Huh!?"

Yelped, but.

"Around here, or back where I live, we always just drink tea. I'd like to take Kaga-san once in a while to someplace stylish, for some stylish juice."

That wouldn't be bad, being a café employee. A little late, but Banri found himself feeling like that. Like he had the energy to race through the interview, get the job and then even get a paycheck all in one go. He suspected that even if he had set aside the time to do it, there'd be too much going on to get it done.

"I mean, I don't want to be a problem for you. Once we get there, I will instantly be in employee mode, and because I will be rather busy, I won't be able to just chat with the customers."

"Hey look, even Oka-chan is talking like this. Let's go, Kaga-san, and have some juice and be cool. We've only just started dating, and we can't be getting into a rut already."

Getting into a rut... Reacting as she had heard a curse, Kouko frowned darkly. Taking the opportunity to take off in pursuit, Banri,

"...But if Kaga-san won't come with me, then I could sneak on over on my own..."

"Eeehhh...!?"

It seemed to work better than he thought it would.

Kouko, a perfectly indecipherable expression on her face, stumbled two steps backwards, her disheveled bangs falling down to the tip of her nose.

A long time passed without her even clearing it away, when finally she let out a gloomy sigh. It seemed that even Kouko had finally given up.

"...Okay. It's all right if today's date be for a juice with style."

"Nyaha, that isn't what the place is called." Chinami cutely steered the topic around.

And so, Banri and Kouko found themselves in a sublimely stylish ambience.

Leaving the two of them in the customer seating, Chinami went into the back room through an entrance way in the back, hard to see from the street.

The light toned interior (stylish!) had a high ceiling (stylish!). Bossa-nova background music (stylish!) echoing in its bowels (cool!). As if cowering from it, Banri looked around the place. Completely overwhelmed, he was hunched over twice as much as usual.

Such was Daikanyama. Style!

The sense of stylish, cultured persons sharpened and magnified to where it reverberated, the café had become an outrageously stylish place. The rustling menu in his hands somehow felt like parchment (so chic!), and sucked up the sweat from Banri's hands.

From the very start, Chinami had been saying it was stylish, it was cool, but only now had the meaning of the word entered into their world.

"What is this... I feel really out of place here."

"You? Not just you, both of us."

All the same, even Kouko looking uncomfortable, squirming a little as she settled into the sofa. Even for the beautiful Kouko, she clearly wasn't adjusting to that stylish place. It was quite different from her taste.

Banri reflected that at their core, people come in different types. There was no universal language, of course. And he had a hunch that there was no universal definition of what constituted "basic culture". And yet already, we have no choice but to say what we think is stylish, and afterwards simply fall back in defeat.

"Aah, this interior design, it really feels nice. It's like my own house's living room."

"Really. In fact, this Karimoku sofa is just like the one we put in our studio."

He doubted if the two guys, stylish hats on their heads, chatting and smiling, ever disagreed. He had a hunch about it. They took their beer bottles in hand, looked each other in the eye and chugged them down with gusto, calling "Cheers!" like foreigners and that kind of stuff. It didn't seem they were joking, nor role-playing, but there they were.

Chinami was however, as incredible as expected.

Dressed stylishly in her uniform shirt and apron, as a stylish employee of a stylish café, she was working stylishly. She adapted to where she was. Or rather, he had a feeling that whatever

environment you tossed Chinami into, her character was such that her cuteness showed through freely. To Banri, she seemed to possess that much capacity.

"...Tada-kun, could you really work here?"

"I don't think I could so much as be a customer here, as I am..."

Flustered by the stylish locale, quite embarrassed, his body lost its balance, and he sank into the sofa at an angle.

* * *

That night, past eight o'clock.

While thinking she might be away from home, Banri reached out his finger to his neighbor's intercom, but upon thinking about it, of course, he stopped. The unpredictable volume of the doorbell might put that difficult person in a bad mood.

For that reason, he tried knocking on her door in a reserved fashion. Shortly,

"...What?"

NANA-senpai suddenly stuck her head out the door, a cigarette in her mouth. In her usual colorless T-shirt and worn out jerseys, she looked strangely pale without her makeup.

From inside the open door, a smell mixed of incense and cigarette smoke slowly flowed towards him. Even though it was suppertime, there was no smell of food at all, Banri could hardly believe what a strange life this person seemed to live. In this regard, Banri's room right now was filled with a smell of stale yakisoba.

"Err, umm, thank you very much for yesterday."

"...What's with you? You reek of yakisoba."

"Oh, yakisoba. Because I ate some. You're right about that, but, well, for now I must return this to you..."

Looking towards the envelope Banri was holding out to her,

"Ah"

It looked like she remembered the money she had lent him for the clinic. She narrowed her eyes,

lit the cigarette clenched in her lips, and gave it a strong pull while she took the envelope. Then suddenly twisting her body to face away from him, she blew the smoke out into the entrance to her own place. He wondered if perhaps she was concerned for his convalescence.

With just that little bit, feeling suddenly warm and fuzzy,

"...Oh man, even if I know it's a trick, it's one of those 'delinquent helps a stray dog in the rain' situations..."

As Banri muttered to himself, the door was shut in his face. Without so much as a good-bye.

When he realized he'd been left behind alone in the outer hallway,

"...Ah!? Hey, hold on NANA-senpai!! We still haven't finished talking!"

When he frantically knocked on the door,

"What's your problem? You're noisy!"

Clicking her tongue sharply at the same time, NANA-senpai deigned to open the door a little once more. There was a furrow on her brow like a lightning bolt.

"Yeah, I've got something to give you! If you'd like, then..."

In thanks for being helped, giving up on the matter of getting a job, he'd bought some stylish cookies and brought them as a gift. NANA-senpai watched Banri holding them out with that sullen look of hers.

Even though he knew she was basically a good person, he backed away a little. Well, his body wouldn't forget when she's knocked him down with a guitar, swung him around by his hair, kicked him in the rear and sent him flying.

"...Sweet stuff, somebody didn't eat them, perhaps?"

Snatching the cookies from the hand of the timidly inquiring Banri, NANA-senpai started examining the list of ingredients on the label closely. Saying "What the...", and then suspiciously, at Banri,

"Nuts"

That was all. Of course, he had no idea what she meant.

"...Huh? Is that something for flavor?"

"It's an allergy. Just to nuts in any case. I probably should be fine accepting this. It'll be my dinner."

"...Err, you're having only cookies for dinner?"

"Gotta problem with that?"

"...I could have brought you some yakisoba. I made too much for me to eat all by myself. It tasted rather good, but unfortunately you can tell I made it myself."

Still leaning against the door, NANA-senpai laughed softly. While she told him she didn't want to be fed by him. He realized it was the first time he had heard her laugh honestly, not in scorn or derision. When Banri automatically laughed in return,

"Is that already healed?"

Using her chin to point, NANA-senpai indicated the bandage near Banri's mouth. Banri nodded.

"It's fine. Though I still have to take my medicine."

"That so."

"Thank you very much, really. What would have happened if you hadn't helped me... it would have been a real disaster. Of my own blood."

Bowing his head once more, at that moment an image flashed through Banri's mind.

Of having escaped without his shoes on, among the mountains in early spring.

Of a light set against the darkness.

Of a voice calling his name.

Oh, that's what it was.

"...What I mean is, even Linda-senpai has rescued me from disaster. It's like my life is nothing but being rescued from disasters by women..."

"Linda. Yep."

She let out a sigh.

Muttering in a strange way, NANA-senpai roughly pulled the spent cigarette from her mouth and shoved it into an ashtray on top of the shoe rack. While that motion for some reason caught his eye, Banri swallowed the questions welling up inside him.

---He wondered how much NANA-senpai knew about himself and Linda.

It seemed to him that Linda and NANA-senpai got along incredibly well. It looked like they hung around together a lot, even staying overnight at NANA's place. He wondered if they talked about

him.

The time he was avoiding Linda like crazy, it was NANA-senpai who forcibly arranged for them to talk, wasn't it?

He wondered how much this person knew, and what she was thinking now.

"...What's with the face? Are you feeling bad about something?"

Looking up at the completely silent Banri's face, NANA-senpai folded her arms. As if she were urging him to speak, she waited without lighting her next cigarette yet.

Involuntarily, complaints began to spill from his throat,

"I'm feeling... well... uncomfortable."

"Oh?"

But, he held his ground.

"...Mainly... well... it's money."

She laughed at his foolish expression. NANA-senpai stepped back for the space of a long breath, her head tilted to the side as if she were amazed. Then she held it out to him.

"You can pay me later."

The envelope with the money he owed her. Banri nearly jumped in panic,

"Eh!? Oh, no no no! That wasn't what I meant at all! Really, really, it would really bother me if you didn't accept that from me!"

Desperately refusing her,

"It would be impossible."

He retreated as if he had been pushed away. He escaped backwards like he was a crab while shaking his head from side to side and hiding both hands behind himself.

"No no no no! I mean, really, I'm okay! I about to look for a part-time job!"

"A part time job? ...Now?"

At last, NANA-senpai seemed to give up on returning the envelope to him. Her hand on her skinny hip, she asked him.

"I'm not working yet. Ah, if by chance you know somebody, or have some pull, please introduce

me, I'm trying to find whatever I can quickly just so I can pay."

"...This weekend."

That ranked up there in speed with Chinami's stylish juices.

"There's a job where you could make a lot in one night, but would you do it? Though it's waiting on tables at a party event. You'd get a full day's pay, at once. ...But I'm telling you ahead of time, you may be given some responsibilities."

Banri sunk his teeth into NANA-senpai's words. Waitering at a party... he couldn't picture it, it would come to him one way or the other. At the very least, it would be better than that stylish café.

"Of course! I want to do it! There's money, so I'll be there! Will there be an interview?"

"I'll be introducing you, so I don't think you have anything to worry about. ...There's just one condition."

Her hand stuffed under her worn T-shirt's hem, scratching herself roughly in her rather flat chest region, NANA-senpai suddenly raised one thin eyebrow at him.

"That guy Yanagisawa. Though it's only what Linda said, he seems to be pretty handsome. Bring that guy along."

Chapter 3

3B

That evening, a little after eight o'clock, Mitsuo knocked on Banri's door.

"Yo. Did you take a nap?"

"I thought it would be a waste of time, but laying still on the futon I eventually fell asleep. And you?"

"It was the same for me."

His body distinguished by his handsome looks more than anything else, his good friend came into the room in his stocking feet and handed Banri a plastic bag.

NANA-senpai had told them to get a nap beforehand, since they'd be working through to the morning. She also told them to bring something to eat, though she had no idea when they'd have their break time. And so, Banri had cooked white rice, and Mitsuo had bought some side dishes.

The always somewhat worried about money Mitsuo having no reason to refuse an invitation to work one day for good money, he had easily complied with NANA-senpai's requirement. Doing so, the two of them came today.

Handing over his portion of the change, split down to the penny, Banri set about preparing the easy dinner at once. Mitsuo, who had already come who knows how many times to visit, sat cross-legged as usual by the side of the low table, while Banri went about gathering the copies of "TV Bros" and sheets of report paper scattered about. And then, while fiddling with the remote control, he looked underneath the table.

"Isn't that your cell-phone making sounds?"

"Oh, it's e-mail. No big deal."

The incoming message light on Banri's charging cellphone continued blinking.

He served up the precooked white rice into suitable bowls and brought them to the table, returning once to the kitchen and bringing bottles and glasses of tea, he then looked at his e-mail.

"Kouko?"

"Yep. It'll wait until after we eat and have some tea. If I don't answer right away, she hangs up. While we're turning into Choushuu Koriki."

Mitsuo laughed, perhaps imagining Kouko, her head tilted to one side, a perfect smile glued to her face, asking him not hang up, but it wasn't really a laughing matter.

Kouko lately... from what Banri had seen since the part time job matter came up... was becoming a really restrictive character.

Worrying excessively, even neurotically over little things, like slow responses to her e-mails (usually because he just hadn't noticed them), why he arrived late for a lecture (because he'd gone to the bathroom), why he was so quiet right now (he hadn't realized he was quiet), which is the cutest? Eh? You can't tell the difference? ...Why? Are you ignoring me?

And so on.

After lectures, she clung to him tightly the whole time. He couldn't even hang out with the guys. As a human being, he wanted to have some time to himself, but couldn't have so much as that. Looking at it objectively, his days continued to be rather stressful.

Of course, he hadn't said a thing to Kouko about today's job.

Lying to her that he'd forgotten about a report in a class Kouko wasn't in, and that in order to hand it in tomorrow he was going to have to pull an all nighter, they parted after third hour and he headed home. When Kouko started to follow, saying "I want to see you working on your report; I can be quiet," he refused, saying "Sorry, but if I don't really concentrate this one time, I'll be in trouble!"

Because it was for the sake of taking Kouko to the sea, he wasn't worried about feeling guilty. Besides, he felt that from the very start, in saying that she didn't want Banri to take a job, Kouko was on the verge of leaving her proper course, straying towards her selfish side.

And most of all, number one,

"It must be annoying, how Kouko is restraining you so devilishly."

"No...? To be honest, it isn't all that bad."

...Because those were his true feelings, because he felt that way.

He wasn't keeping quiet and keeping his distance because it was annoying or troublesome. And so I guess I have no choice, thought Banri this evening, having no intention of blaming himself.

Messages from Kouko, as always, were silly things. Things like 'I'm drinking black tea ☆' That so~? Without any variation in reply. Every time, every time, it was like this. Good morning, good night, time to eat, I ate, I painted my nails, I cleaned my nails, I'm tired, I'm hungry, our cat, my little brother, it's hot, it's cold, it's fun, it's boring, where are you now? What are you doing? Do you love me? How much? Hey, hey, hey... Banri's cell-phone's predictive text algorithm already went like this: "So" becomes "That so?" "Me" becomes "Me too~", "Un" becomes "Understood" and "I" becomes "I love you too!" ...It was well on its way to becoming completely trained.

But, he didn't mind. Not at all.

Though it was not a laughing matter, it was off the beaten path and stressful, and while he had fallen into the situation, Banri was still enjoying himself aplenty, and was happy too. For a girl

such as her to be so insistent over a guy such as himself... that was incredible.

At the end of the day, very simply, he felt that he was in love with Kouko.

Even if she caused him some undue trouble, it honestly seemed to him a joy. Passing through thirty pieces of empty mail per day was enough to make him smile. Even in pain, or depressed, or being a pain, she was so cute he couldn't help it. He was absolutely, completely happy with how Kouko loved him, how she obsessed over him, and he couldn't get enough of it.

If he entirely lost such days as these, or such times, he had no idea if he would be able to find happiness in this life. Life would become truly dull and meaningless, he thought. It would become completely empty.

Really, that was how he felt.

Those things... the feelings towards Linda that had been brought back to life, not saying anything, swallowing it to the best of his ability, it didn't seem that his emotions towards Kouko were any the less. In Banri's heart there should be only one of them; two people's worth of love could not exist together there. Apart from whether or not he would despise such a self as that.

He wondered if it was something people got good at, and recently even felt so. He wondered if everybody was like this. Or, with his problem they called amnesia, he wondered if he would become like them, given how his own personality had not yet entirely solidified.

Things could not remain like this indefinitely; he wondered if things would fall apart, that somebody would get hurt badly, and there would be a failure he could not bear to watch.

...He wondered, in this process, would his own heart change?

Which of his doubled selves would perish in the end?

He wondered if he was only at the very start of the adventure.

"I'm glad you met and are dating Kouko, really."

Mitsuo said that right after he'd started greedily eating his meal.

Once he'd sent a short reply to Kouko, Banri turned and look at that profile. He was indeed handsome, stuffing food into his wide open mouth as a young man would. With mixed feelings, part in wonder, part in guilt, Banri stared at him for several seconds.

"...How so?"

Or something, he asked back, a little bit idiotically. Hm? Mitsuo looked back at him sidelong.

"What do you mean, 'How so?' Because you know, I don't think just any guy would accept that

failure of a stalker. You tolerate that stuff very well."

"...Well, of course I do. I love her. Kouko, that is."

"But aren't there limits to that? I've been watching over how you and Kouko have gotten along from the start, and it seems to me that you guys long ago went past those limits. Two Dimensions was a bit attracted by her too. In the abstract. She's always all over you, isn't she?"

"Hehe..."

Setting down his cell-phone, Banri set himself by the table too. Taking his rice bowl and chopsticks in hand half pretending, he waited and laughed.

The wound under the bandage below his mouth was of course still there. Not even moistened, it hurt something fierce.

"In general no, but because there's an incredible love, it's all right."

"Whoa... it's been a while since I've heard Banri speaking fondly of her. Of course, it feels a little creepy."

While he ate up the side dishes to a good feeling cadence, Mitsuo laughed even more. Watching that handsome, healthy, smiling face, he wondered just how different it was from his own.

Healthy and unhealthy. Handsome and unattractive. An honest person and a lying lout. A person prospering, and one who has confessed. Like positive and negative, completely opposite beings.

For some reason his chopsticks not moving, Banri shut his mouth then and there. He wondered how one such as himself would appear in Mitsuo's eyes? And then in Kouko's eyes. In Linda's eyes...

Suddenly, he felt as if he were looking into a mirror.

(It's all right because you love her, right?)

Tada Banri, his appetite gone, sat still.

On his knees before his own table, in his own room, he held his chopsticks in his right hand, his rice bowl in his left.

With his injured lip still swollen, not yet receding, a bandage remained on his face. He wore his usual blue-jeans and oversized house-coat T-shirt. His unkempt hair was too long, and it seemed that Banri had not noticed how much it showed from behind.

(You have a guilty conscience, and are feeling sorry for thinking such things as 'I want to return to where Linda is', so if you could be put up with, if you could be forgiven, ...that would be nice.)

So close we could almost touch noses, I stared back at my former self, right next to his face in the flesh. I wanted to find the colors of honesty and of falsehood in his eyes.

(That's disgusting...)

"..."

He wondered who it was that was muttering.

From beside him, Mitsuo softly poked the motionless Banri, his eyes staring vacantly off into space still, on the elbow. Coming back to himself, he saw that face.

"What's wrong? Eat! Didn't senpai from next door said she's coming about nine o'clock?"

"...Ah, yes..."

"Waiting tables, eh? It's the first time for me. I suppose the drinks will be prepared, of course. I don't like tending to drunkards and cleaning up after them..."

"...Ah, I wonder how it'll be? I didn't hear too many details about what we'll be doing."

"If it's like working as a host, what'll we do? We'll be forced to be chatty. Even though we are both rather quiet types."

Without any concerns, he had a refreshing smile.

Without Kouko next to him, he thought him handsome and without any inferiority. Easy to get along with, he was normally a really nice guy. He felt glad, from the bottom of his heart, that he had become his friend.

That Kouko had naturally fallen in love with the guy, even Banri could understand completely. If he were a girl, he probably would have fallen for him quickly.

Rather, he still didn't understand very well why she had clearly gone down a level from the cool-looking Yana-ssan, or so it seemed.

In Kouko's heart, Yanagisawa Mitsuo and Tada Banri were both present, but now only Tada Banri was left, and yet he wondered how in the world it had turned out that way. He wondered if it had been because he had confessed his feelings to her after she'd been clearly rejected by Yanagisawa Mitsuo. Had just that one thing really undone her ten years of unrequited love?

Clearly, Kouko had selected the one of lesser worth. When he thought it over again, that was the strange part he could not understand.

She hadn't lost her memories like he had.

In spite of this he wondered why this kind of thing could happen... how in the world?

Anyway, a woman would understand that way of doing things, surely.

Banri, who had once more become lost in thought, was brought back by a knock at the door. That rough noise. The ferocious style of knocking.

"Ah, that's probably NANA-senpai."

Banri set down aside his chopsticks, but,

"I'll get it."

Stuffing the last bite into his wide-open mouth, Mitsuo stood up. Banri turned himself around and looked over towards the doorway.

Outside the door, as he expected, was NANA-senpai standing there in her usual cosplay... no, in a punk outfit, not waiting for Mitsuo's reaction when he saw it,

"Hmph. You must be the guy they call Yana. Now I get it. You're sure a pretty one, aren't you?"

"Kyaa!?"

She suddenly lifted Mitsuo's T-shirt by the hem to verify his abs. She said just one word, "Allright!", and then, turning towards something Banri couldn't see in the outer hallway,

"Linda, well done!"

She said something like that.

Banri pulled out and dropped the hamburger he'd stuffed into his mouth.

This evening, he and Mitsuo were to go and be introduced for a part-time job by NANA-senpai. That was the plan.

But he hadn't heard that Linda was going to be there too. "Oh! Hello, good evening!" Mitsuo's voice lept from the entrance hallway, sounding happy.

* * *

The situation was confused from the very start.

"Which one!?"

Mitsuo was unable to choose between really tight silver boxer shorts and flesh-colored bikini briefs with gold lame.

"Uu, uuuuuu~~~~...!"

He was just like Rodin's "The Thinker." Or perhaps, he was just a cool looking guy troubled by constipation.

Seated with the upper half of his body bare, he was running a cold sweat and comparing the two undershorts with a desperate look on his face.

"Hurry up and decide! And then put it on! Hey you, are you ready!?"

Openly irritated, he threw the two pair of undershorts at Mitsuo, and the mysterious person's gaze turned towards Banri. Suddenly standing up,

"Hey! I'm ready!"

"You're ugly!"

He was showing off, and yet at the same time being spit upon and jeered. And yet,

"But kinda sexy too...!"

His hand, bedecked with rings, slid over suggestively, brushing gently against his inner thigh. *Is that so? Me, sexy?* The masked, heavyset, middle-aged man they called 'Boss', wearing a golden suit like Dandy Sakano, went off, leaving the strangely moved Banri and the half-naked Mitsuo behind. When a suited staffer called out "Oh Boss, today's the masquerade, isn't it!?" he flirtateously replied "I'm the Phantom! The Phantom of the Opera House!" He was Dandy Sakano, though he wasn't saying so.

"Well, Yana-ssan, you'd better make up your mind quick!"

"Oh, ooh... but I really am just a little lost... ah, what should I do!? Shoot, to think the day would come when I'd be worried about something like this!"

If he used the silver one in his right hand, it wouldn't show through. And then, in terms of cloth coverage, his butt would be safe.

The flesh-colored bikini clutched in his left hand was too sheer. It had a T-back too, and was

curved in such a way that it wasn't going to house his nether regions nor his butt adequately. But he told The Boss, "You'll have to give me another ten thousand for me to wear this here."

One way or the other, in just this one layer of underwear, Mitsuo couldn't help but expose his swaying nudity to public gaze. That, in its entirety, was the job he had been given this evening.

Then in view before him, a handsome man, looking like a foreign model, who seemed to have been given the same duties as Mitsuo, went trotting by, beer in one hand, wearing flesh-colored bikini-style briefs. Speaking of a raw atmosphere, down there in his nether region heavy things were swaying. Without realizing it, he followed him the whole with with his eyes. That figure from behind, the bare behind better than Mitsuo's own, stole the words from his mouth.

In the wide, but warm and dark back room, there were twenty other workers this evening, every one of them gaudily costumed and moving about restlessly. An echoing, heavy bass background music was starting to come through a curtain that was struck over and over again, along with the murmur of a crowd. From the kitchen area there often came an unintelligible bellow. It seemed the event was already starting.

The place NANA-senpai brought them to by car was the same live show place he remembered taking Kouko to.

Today they were doing a party by reservation only. Along with their sponsor, the "boss", when they entered the locale there was already a line of guests outside, from young people to suspicious looking older folks, all of them extremely gaudy, and all of them of questionable gender. He wondered if whoever's birthday it was, was into cosplay parties. The crowd of people, dressed in beautiful dresses and suits, costumes, women's clothing, men's clothing, from cartoon characters to seriously enhanced drag queens here and there, everybody in original styles to suit themselves, like only on Halloween. They were being sucked into the secret underground room, received by Chemical Brothers playing loud enough to split their ears.

The moment he saw the crowd, even the slow-witted Banri realized it might be a pretty hard job. Mitsuo, upon seeing Banri's expression, went quiet too. But, with NANA-senpai and Linda on either side of them, their faces unconcerned, the two of them had no choice but to prepare themselves.

As soon as NANA-senpai introduced them to the boss, he stripped off Mitsuo's T-shirt, handed him the underwear and ordered him off to choose which one he would use. As it happened, the boss took the T-shirt, buried his face in it, sniffed it like crazy and finally announced, "What is this thing!? It's disgusting! Never wear it again! I'm confiscating it!" Because of that, Mitsuo had already decided to return home half-naked.

At that point, something seeming not quite right, with Banri and Mitsuo being given different roles,

"If you're that puzzled, what if I pick!?"

He was already completely ready. Having some extra time for the moment,

"Anyhow, either of them is embarrassing. That being the case, shouldn't you just go for it!? In for an inch, in for a mile!"

He had planned on making a considered judgement, but the very loud music that could be heard leaking through to them pushed him to speak, and Banri handed Mitsuo the flesh-colored bikini.

"Eeeh!? Seriously...!? Seriously...!"

Mitsuo was for a moment lost for words, the so-transparent lame briefs held tightly still in his hands, his breath held. Presently,

"Don't you mean... instead! You instead! Aren't I embarrassed enough!? Don't I have a little respect!?"

Slowly, he looked up at Banri. Banri looked down at himself once again.

"I'm already used to it! I've accepted how I look!"

Banri, of whom the opera-house Dandy Sakano had commented, "You may be an ugly girl, but you're sexy," was wearing a fluffy, bobbed, silver haired wig, a bustier in goth-loli style, and a black mini-skirt maid uniform.

He'd received some temporary makeup, but for now, even if he said so himself, he was really ugly. The exposed, rather bony chest, the feel of his arms where they came out of the puffy sleeves, the un-softness of his legs where they were exposed below the garters, wherever you looked, his body's build was that of a skinny young man. Indeed, his style as a cross-dresser was miserable. This was what Banri looked like this evening.

"Well, with this cut lip, you see, 'You look like a maid who's been abused by her master! And the reason you were abused is because you're ugly!' ...the Boss said that, and this is the result!"

"Oh ho...!"

A silver tray under his arm, an earphone he'd been handed stuck in one ear, a wireless receiver stuffed into pouch slung across his shoulder. When he saw what he looked like in the mirror, a dry chuckle escaped his lips.

"Well, you've changed too, even though there isn't space for a guy to change! Around here, everybody had the freedom to change nude."

"...I know what you mean. It stood a little. I hid mine."

"Good!"

Hiding Mitsuo by spreading the frilly miniskirt, like covering him with flowers, Banri fiddled with the ends of his wig with his fingertips. He felt the stiff lace around his chest, arranged the pleats in the cloth, applied gloss to his wound and made sure it was smooth and matched in color.

For some time now, the deafening bass rhythm had been sending him into a trance. This must be how a girl feels, he thought, as he was captured by the mysterious sensation. His high-heeled feet extended naturally straight forward, trying to breathe, strangely aware they were being watched. The high-heeled Kouko must live in a world like this every day of her life. Conscious of her hair, aware of her clothing, noticing her makeup, aware of her feet, and so on over and over again. He admired her great sense of aesthetics, one which aimed for perfection.

"I... got it on... but..."

Mitsuo groaned in a very thin voice. When Banri looked back at him, he was practically nude.

"...I wonder, will this, be okay...!?"

Tension showed on his handsome, manly face, and every time he moved the shadows of his muscles stood out mesmerizingly. His body was like a sculpture.

On the other hand, the center of the flesh-colored bikini's sparkling lame lewdly shouted to all the world, "Ev-er-y-body! Here is something obscene!"

"...You're, you're fine! You're super cool, Yana-ssan!"

The horribly embarrassed Mitsuo shoved his hair into order, and, looking desperate, held his head high. The jeans, underwear and socks he had removed were tossed into a chair.

A black guy dressed as a chinese girl... or maybe a really tall girl, in any case one of his fellow co-workers for this evening, zipped past him carrying a silver tray just like Banri's and whistled at him.

"Thanks! Jeez, it's no wonder I thought that was a lot of money! This isn't just an ordinary job, for that kind of money!"

"Nevertheless, Yana-ssan, with those see-through briefs you're up by 10,000 yen!"

"If Chinami were to see me like this, I'd probably die!"

"Nooo, wouldn't Oka-chan normally run with it? Laughing like crazy, and then waving her camera around!?"

"No, no way no way no way! I wouldn't be able to stand it! What if Kouko saw you like that?"

"Yeah! Kaga-san might even be good with this, and let me be seen as if it were normal!"

It wasn't about not wanting to be seen in women's clothing, but rather it was about lying and working a part time job, and yet...

"Really? But of course, you're pretty cool about it! I mean, the way things are right now, I wonder what those guys are dressed up like? NANA-senpai and Linda!"

"They said they had to change, and disappeared. I haven't seen them for a while now!"

"There's no way they're like this!"

Said Mitsuo, pointing at himself,

"No way!"

Banri laughed loudly, but at that moment,

"Ooh!? Ya, Yana-ssan... isn't it!? Eh, Tada Banri!? Wow, NANA-senpai, take a look!"

"Whoa, fantastic!"

It was Linda and NANA-senpai's voices. Looking back at the two of them,

"Eeeh... Eh...!?"

"No, aren't you two the fantastic ones!?"

Reflexively, Banri and Mitsuo pointed too, and both sets wound up pointing at each other.

Linda and NANA-senpai were dressed exactly alike, in precisely the same fashion.

Their wigs were like Banri's, cut to follow the jawline, but were purple. They wore devil horns attached to hairbands, an earphone in one ear, and a pouch with a wireless receiver in it.

The only thing covering any part of their upper bodies was a skimpy black bikini top.

Secured only by flimsy straps around the neck and around the back, their upper chest, back, stomach, armpits and navel, in the darkness everything seemed to be exposed, standing out pure white. And yet exposed as they were, it hardly felt erotic. NANA-senpai so stoic and so very gaunt, with Linda who was so poised and beyond pretty, he wondered if they were from the same planet. What's more, as a matching set of two, they had twice the character, so to speak.

The lower half of their bodies was dressed similarly, with short shorts, lame tights and knee-high boots, silver trays in one hand, the two of them alike.

"We're the 'Devil Twins'!"

According to NANA-senpai. As it happened, there was a lighter and three cigarettes stuffed into the bikini bra over her flat chest. The deep bass notes shook the painful looking piercings that extended from her earlobes to the cartilage, making them shake in the darkness, mysteriously glittering like a summons.

For her part, Linda, a little bit embarrassed, hiding her chest with her tray,

"But the Boss told us 'You guys have no sex appeal at all! Skin and bones like that, you're going to wither away and die!' I mean…"

She laughed with a nasal voice.

"Neither Yana-ssan and Tada Banri match each other at all!"

She looked up at Banri and gave him a sharp glance. The makeup on her face was much stronger than her usual.

NANA-senpai's face, with that makeup, was hardly any different from usual, but Linda's face, made up like that, was like that of a stranger.

Her eyelids painted over darkly by eyeshadow, her eyeliner was drawn sharply uplifted, giving a cat eye effect. She wore glossy, fake eyelashes. She had applied coloring to her narrow eyebrows, as if they were lips.

Whereas normally she was just lightly built, nicely arranged and easy on the eyes, with that makeup she was transformed into a truly different person. Her looks were so exotic, they felt beautiful. She had a small face, it's silhouette that of a very young girl, but with a cold gaze that

seemed incredibly low and deliberately mean. Her abs were quite solid, for a woman, and he wondered how much attention their three-dimensional appearance attracted from those around her. How she acquired them, he had no idea, but made to dance by her bright, deft movements, they made the devil-Linda's looks all the more conspicuous.

Not putting on airs, treading lightly, naturally, simply... that was Linda's normal image, but this evening she was completely the opposite. Everything was backwards. She was a baleful demon, the thing itself, danger dripping thickly from her.

"Li, Linda..."

As if it were being drawn to it, Banri's mouth approached Linda's ear. But at that very moment, the volume of the music rising even more around them,

"...Senpai, this isn't the first time for you at this job!?"

"Hm!? What!?"

His voice couldn't reach her anymore.

"Well, that's the word! Everybody to work! Move it!"

The staff in suits clapped their hands and sent the keyed-up part-timers out into the hall.

Mitsuo was too nervous to move, but the foreigner who was dressed the same as him came over, whispered something in his ear, and right away started rubbing Mitsuo's body down with oil. Banri was a little shocked at the undisguised gayness of his hand motions, but Mitsuo seemed rather determined, and took the oil in hand and started spreading more and more over his entire body. Combing up their hair as a finishing touch, the other handsome guys gathered there began to disappear behind the curtain. Incidentally, with all of them in flesh-colored bikini shorts, it seemed he'd made the right choice.

Pushing Banri from behind, NANA-senpai jerked her chin.

"Well, get moving! Do you know what you have to do!? First of all, go over to the bartenders with a tray and get sake. Move around amongst the customers as much you can, and no taking any for yourself! If you receive a request, pass it on! Likewise, when you go out with food, no taking any for yourself! The bartender's girls made them for us after all! Keep the glasses and trash collected for us! Read the mood well, become a part of the scenery, and be cool, calm and collected!"

"Un, understood! Oh yeah, cellphones..."

Banri's cellphone had been stuffed into the pocket of a bag and left behind on the back of a chair. He had intended to stuff it in the pouch with the wireless while he worked, but,

"Cell phone!? You can't, no way, that would make the Boss really mad!"

Reproved like that by Linda, he'd given up. Well, he supposed it couldn't be helped. It's a job.

While begging that it simply not be stolen and hiding the bag under a chair where it couldn't be seen, Banri followed after Linda and NANA-senpai, passing through the curtain too.

The stressful, hot, humid air, the retina-cooking laser beams, and the loud detonations of the breaking beats right in front of Banri's body all rushed in to assault him.

* * *

Winding his way between the ecstatically dancing people, age-inappropriate light sticks placed on their sweat covered bodies here and there, Banri strutted around on to the floor in high heels.

"Anything's good! Gimme a strong sake!"

When a forty-ish looking woman, dressed in a loose, one layer, one piece dress, a silver whistle stuck in her cleavage, shouted in his ear, Banri stopped.

When the party had just started, though every time somebody called him, he'd respond, "Ah, yes sir!" "Here's the menu!", the boss would shout at him "You're too hesitant!" and stuff three pieces of gum into his mouth all at once. He could handle the disgusting flavor, so whenever he was to chew it, Banri dutifully kept chewing on the now flavorless gum.

As he did so quietly, he would glance from side to side. With a simple nod, he would dodge.

From here and there arms would reach out to him on their own and place empty glasses on his silver tray. Once he had enough, he would walk over to the bar counter. They looked like glasses, but in reality they were light plastic tumblers, and however many were piled up, they weren't dangerous.

Selecting the appropriate drinks from those already prepared, he returned to where the person had been. He had to excuse himself twice, bumping into the wildly enthusiastic guests and spilling sake on them.

After he handed over the sake and collected the empty glasses, he received instructions over the wireless to pass out hors d'oeuvre. He thought it was certainly about time for them. Virtually everybody was dancing like crazy, non-stop. Without a doubt, they all needed the calories.

The party was getting terribly crowded.

Around midnight the birthday song rang out. It took some time to blow out all the candles on the huge cake for the female guest of honor (she looked young, but when he peeked in the kitchen, there were 45 candles there), but if you thought about it, it was a unique way of telling time.

Who knows how many hours went by after that? There were ever more guests, the sake kept flowing, there were famous guest DJs that Banri wasn't familiar with, and adults who should have known better fooling around non-stop.

In the middle of it all, when he turned to see what people were cheering at, he could see scattered here and there around the hall individual pedestals, with foreign models in flesh-colored bikinis showing off their wares (no touch!). All of a sudden, the Boss threw off his golden suit and sprang up to dance on one. His Calvin Kleins screamed out, stuck closely to his posterior. When it appeared that his disgusting belly was dashed against the other man, and the two of them were entangled as if they were pushing their hips together, the excitement of the older ladies looking on all at once went up. Shortly, however, the Boss, brandishing the splayed fingers of both hands, was shouting "Gets! Gets!" As you might expect, he had none of the presence of Dandy. At least take your socks off, he thought.

When he looked towards Mitsuo on his own pedestal, his face said clearly "I'm glad he didn't come over here!" It was so easy to see that when he met the laughing Banri's eyes, he showed a soft smile too. At being passed by that smile, the women stared and stared.

Amidst the boisterously flashing and dancing lights, Mitsuo's skin shone brightly. His supple, muscular body was young, and as beautiful as an animal. Even if he didn't draw the attention the foreign models did, lifting both his arms high, flexing his abs to the music, was he not rather splendid?

One time, while in the restroom during an intermission, he said "The foreigner guys told me it was okay to be a copy-cat, so that's what I'm doing!" sweat dripping quietly from his face as he was breathing heavily. Between this and that, it even looked like he was having fun. Swinging his shoulders as if to fan and cool them, he composed his expression as cool as he could, turned a hot gaze to just beyond touching distance, became one with the other beautiful things livening up the hall and for just one night anonymously channelled the wild enthusiasm of those around.

He's in a mental state where he doesn't even understand it, thought Banri.

This night was sliced out of Tada Banri's life, and as far as he was concerned, it was, unexpectedly, not bad.

In this unusual environment, he was changed into a another person entirely. Chewing on gum while feeling cool and creepy, he had become like a machine, simply doing his work. And so the time went passing by. The music and the deep rumbling was transmitted through his high-heels to his pelvis, spine and even his skull, continually providing a stimulus as if to numb him, and in the darkness, the garish lights danced wildly about, as if they'd gone mad.

His five senses were painted over by the overwhelming stimuli, his ego was painted over with the image of another person, his body was enslaved to the job: he himself had no room for choice in the matter. Strangely, it felt good for now.

Not possessing even his own body, he would ride through this brilliant night.

When he bent over to load up his silver tray with hors d'oeuvre, he seemed to feel somebody touching him, as if to catch him. He turned around.

It was the Devil... Linda, laughing.

She was looking at Banri, her bare skin moistened by sweat because of the heat, her cheeks, collarbones and shoulders gleamed damply, and as far as he could tell in the darkness, her face was red too. And then,

"Aren't you exhausted!? Are you okay!?"

While the heavy beat pushed her hip softly against him in time with the music, Linda shouted in his ear. Between this and that, his ears had already become completely dull.

"It's rather fun! Somehow, I seem to have gotten surprisingly addicted!"

Drawing her ear closer to Banri so he could shout back to her, her purple wig stuck to her cheeks by her sweat, Linda gave a big nod.

"It sure is that way! It's something fun for me too, and in fact this is the fourth time I've worked an event for the Boss!"

"Wow! Is that you how usually dress!?"

"Nope! It isn't fixed! I've done many kinds!"

Their bodies equally heated, both of them soaked with sweat, if they'd only realized, the two of them were stuck together at the shoulder. If they weren't so close, they wouldn't be able to hear each other.

And,

"You two over there, you're super cute! Could we take pictures!?"

A group of completely drunk girls were shouting and pointing their cell phones toward them. The bewildered Banri stammered out,

"It's okay!"

In the mood for it, Linda pulled Banri's shoulder over and posed as if they were dancing close

together. *Kyaa!* The girls got excited, and the other guests began to notice them. He felt Linda's tights against his inner thigh. Body heat. Getting the chills, he had goosebumps all the way up his spine.

But, if they drew attention to themselves here, it would be really uncool, and the mood would be broken. So that he could somehow match Linda's sharp, bouncing movements, Banri wrapped his hand around her firm waist.

Entwining her arms with Banri's, Linda bent her waist back and forth softly, in synch with the rhythm. Her gaze self-assured, she was clearly having fun. As if directing the people's gazes, she slowly fluttered her white fingertips.

This evening, in this place, they were not Tada Banri and Hayashida Nana, but a cool, gum-chewing cross-dressing maid and a cat-eyed devil.

They were two bodies, without past, present or future, with no relation to such things, for the moment only, limited to this place, existing only in this moment.

Thinking it funny, one of the guests stuck a glow-stick in Linda's mouth. Accepting it gracefully, Linda bit the point with her front teeth while she lifted the ends of her lips in a smile.

He was thinking, I want to do like that, right now.

Without any sort of reason, nor goal, nor even desire, Banri's body simply moved. Placing his arm behind Linda's back, he forced her back, supporting her with his legs. Leaning over her, he bit the other end of the light stick.

The cheering rose more and more hotly, deafening his ears. The pounding beat grew far away. Linda narrowed her cat-like eyes a bit, as if to see the color of Banri's eyes.

At that moment, at the edge of his vision, he glimpsed a pair of incredibly pretty shoes.

They were high-heeled sandals, of delicate make, but having a gorgeous profile.

It suddenly struck Banri: To wear such shoes, a woman must surely be suited to them. He, too, knew what it was to wear high heels, but he was not the sort to be forever standing on tip-toes while remaining conscious of his own body. He wondered, how in the world could one sacrifice, in pain, to sustain their own body weight on something so high and yet so tiny?

What's more, her ankles were so slender, her calves were tense. Her knees were slim too, and she had truly beautiful feet. A model, or a star? An actress? He wondered: when she walked, were her feet not completely exalted in beauty?

And then, halfway up her thighs, he saw the hem of her skirt. It had the appearance of a summer knit. When he looked beyond, he saw a sleeveless ruffled one-piece dress. At the base of her neck there was a necklace, and she had matching bracelets.

That's a woman with a rather ideal shape, thought Banri, strangely carefree. Her face could not be seen, but though he could not see up to the face, he felt an aura that shouted "There's a beauty here!"

He wondered, had he been born a woman, would he have done up his hair like that, so extravagantly? Would he hold a clutch-bag under his arm like that, expose his slender shoulders like that, and show off his perfect looks to the public like that?

Indeed, truly perfect...

"...Huh...!?"

Gum clogging his throat, Banri spat out the glow-stick he'd held in his mouth.

Flipping his body up, he looked at the perfect shape of that person.

Lost in this party, dressed in a brand-name one-piece dress, a perfect beauty with a beautiful face as frightened as could be. A perfect smile. A perfect standing figure.

The woman: the perfected Kaga Kouko.

Taking one step towards Banri, who was still holding the Devil's... no Linda's form, her perfect, beautiful face not moving a single millimeter yet,

"...Bah...!"

She splashed the sake she had in her glass in Banri's face.

His eyes and nose. He threw his head back, coughing as if about to drown, unable to speak yet. How was Kouko here? How? Why?

"You're mistaken, Ko-ko-chan!"

Her voice echoed, as if she were screaming.

"You're mistaken! Look, it's me, Linda! Hayashida Nana!"

Picking herself up and out of Banri's arms, Linda frantically raised her voice.

He realized that Kouko's lips were moving, saying "I know that." And then,

"...ngh!"

Her open hand flew up and delivered a hard slap to Banri's cheek. And then, for some reason, there was applause from all around. The feverish, surging beat did not stop.

Chapter 4

41

Not passing people nor cars, Banri ran as if struggling through the quiet pre-dawn streets.

The sky was still dark.

Clouds covering half the sky, the shadows were jet black. The wind was blowing steadily, and from the other direction a pale blue light was just starting to spread. Clearly, the night seemed to be ending, he thought.

When Banri got on the first train, it was just after five in the morning.

NANA-senpai, Linda and Mitsuo were still at the live house, and were probably taking part in the after-party.

Umm, about the circumstances with Kouko.

...As for unpleasantness with Linda afterwards, there was none. Linda was frantically apologizing, saying "Sorry, sorry, sorry. I was a little drunk. I'm really sorry." She lowered her head to her junior, the still silent, paralyzed Kouko. To Banri, dressed in women's clothing, covering his cheeks like a girl drenched in sake and slapped. To the amused-seeming guests passing by.

NANA-senpai, who sensed trouble on the way, imposed herself and scattered the guests, pulled Linda over by the arm, and took her over by the counter.

Banri, seeing that quick action and seeing Kouko, returned to his senses. Taking the still standing Kouko's hand and pulling her into the back room, he somehow passed his room key to her.

I'm working right now, so there's nothing I can do, but because I really want to talk with you, I'd like you to wait at my place, he asked her calmly, begging her. Kouko didn't say anything; she just looked at the key clasped in her hand. The way she's looking at it, thought Banri, shivering.

But he couldn't wait for her answer, and Banri returned out to the hall once more, and yet going into the wet heat from before... no, the party had gotten yet more intense.

But now he seemed to have been unbound from the spell that had held him earlier.

In uproar just now, he had actually swallowed the gum, and the one here now was just Tada Banri. He was no longer the cool cross-dresser, on his everyday off-campus job. He was an ordinary student.

The mood and the excitement lost, silver tray in one hand, he returned to the simple work of getting people their drinks. Unable to talk with Linda after that, he was just waiting for quitting time. When Kouko had slapped him, it had struck him right on the wound on his lip, and his mouth tingled the whole time, giving him real pain.

His thoughts were only "What shall I do?"

He wondered what she thought of it all. His lie had been exposed. He'd been seen flirting with Linda. He'd given her his key. What should he do...

If Kouko went home in disgust of him, he would not be able to return to his own place.

But, being in disgust, being hated, being dumped even, was perhaps to be expected.

...Simply thinking of such matters made him depressed. Even being paid in cash under the table for the job, as the boss had promised, he thought that he may no longer even have a purpose for it.

And so, alone, without asking his friends to return with him, he changed his clothes in a hurry, washed his face roughly, and left the place. He headed off for the station running. The other people who got on the first train with him didn't pay special attention to the one young person riding with remnants of heavy makeup on his face.

Seating himself, he looked at his phone. There were more than sixty messages on it. Where are you now? Why aren't you answering? What are you doing? Are you okay...? He couldn't open any more of them. The incoming call log was filled to capacity, entirely by Kouko. Banri covered his face with both hands. He couldn't breathe out. He couldn't breathe at all.

Unable to contact him, Kouko was searching for him constantly from about ten o'clock onwards.

She left her house at midnight.

She arrived and found nobody home. That was at one in the morning.

Going around to Banri's usual haunts, from the area convenience stores, to the family restaurants, bars, Mitsuo's place, around school... she went here and there, searching all over, and having went everywhere once she arrived at the live house a bit after three thirty in the morning.

In high heels and a one piece dress, in a state of total panic, alone, Kouko was running around the center of Tokyo. Searching for signs of the vanished liar Banri.

She seemed to have thought he might have had an accident, or he'd suddenly gotten sick, and was fallen somewhere. Her messages got really choppy. Because I'm coming now! Because you will be fine! Because I will absolutely find you! ---Pushing back his forelocks, Banri had nothing to say.

Truly nothing.

He was to blame.

Kouko had been clinging to him, not giving him the impression she was strong, and while he knew she was a person who would jump to conclusions, he had lied to her, and made as if to break contact with her.

And having done that, he was discovered at last, working hard in a fun job with Linda. Even though Kouko had hated him doing such a thing.

And then, what he had done with Linda...

He felt there was no excuse for what he said, nor for what he thought. He simply accepted all that Kouko felt and wished for.

Finally arriving at his own station, exiting the ticket gate, Banri ran once more. Bursting into his own apartment room, which he might have left unlocked,

"...Kaga-san...?"

Kouko was sitting there by herself in the quiet, pre-dawn darkness.

Not fiddling with her cell-phone, truly vacantly, without even crying.

"Kaga-san, err... really..."

While Banri frantically searched for the words to say, he removed his shoes, as if kicking them off. Coming into the room, he sat down at Kouko's side as if collapsing. Calming his heaving breath, squeezing his gasping throat, somehow trying to utter a single word of apology,

"I'm sorry for tossing sake at you. For hitting you too. Even though your wound wasn't healed yet. I'm sorry."

Kouko beat him to the punch.

"...Even though I wanted to be a 'good girl' and not do such things, I messed up. Of course I did. ...Whatever I've done, I've messed up."

Kouko had blamed herself.

As if his guts were being caught hold of, Banri couldn't say anything, still gasping for air. Though he should have been prepared, the dread of the situation suddenly clogged his throat.

He saw it clearly.

The beloved person he had thought to gain, he was in the process of losing. Now.

Already, that person didn't like him. She would never show him a smile again. She wouldn't search him out. She wouldn't ask for him.

"...So..."

He was no longer to be found inside of her.

I have disappeared. No matter where you look, I've vanished.

I've vanished...

"...I'm very sorry! Really, I am! ...Sorry...!"

In a poze as if prostrating himself, Banri, still seated by Kouko's side, bowed his head over and over again.

"I wanted to take you to the beach. No matter what. I wanted to look like a proper boyfriend, not be treated, but to look cool. No matter what, no matter what, I wanted to have money. And so, I lied to you and worked a job in secret. I didn't know I'd be with Linda-senpai. But together, acting as if we were a couple, things got exciting and strange, and we stuck together for the sake of the guests. That's all it was, really. I'm sorry for making you worry. And for lying. Really, truly, I am sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry..."

Over and over again, he desperately bowed his head. Over and over again, the sound of his forehead against the floor lifted into the air.

About to lose her in reality, he was more desperate than he thought. He didn't feel there was no way. He couldn't just give up. It was like his brain had caught on fire, thinking about whether there was any way things could work out, or there was any way he could be forgiven. If he could be forgiven, what should he do, his voice shook. His hands, flat on the floor, shook too.

After all that had happened.

He understood it.

But, he was scared of it.

He had no choice but to be scared, really scared. It was more than he could bear.

If he could be relied on, he wanted to be relied on. He didn't want to think about vanishing from Kouko's life. It was as if he himself had disappeared. It was as if it had all come to nothing. Doing so, becoming empty, everything, everything would be lost completely. Again. So somehow, because I'll do anything, I'll say anything, so I'm asking you, please, please...

Kouko stayed quiet for a while longer, and then finally,

"...ngh..."

He understood it to be a sign she was trying to say something. Banri, like an animal, lifted his

eyes quickly and looked at Kouko's face. Kouko, opening her mouth once,

"...Then, why..."

Saying that much she closed her mouth again, once more silent. She made a strange face, as if testing the flavor of something held in her mouth, twice, three times, tilting her head to the side, trying to smile,

"...Li,"

A small noise sounding from her throat, she fell silent again.

She closed her eyes.

She took a couple of breaths of if counting, and opened her eyes. She looked at Banri. And then,

"That much, you said."

She formed her lips into the shape of a smile, but they trembled slightly.

"...I hate it... when you lie...!"

Before Banri's eyes, Kouko's white finger pointed to one corner of the room.

Understanding what she meant, Banri gasped.

What Kouko was pointing at: the cheap box that did duty as his bookshelf. The place from which the picture had suddenly disappeared.

Kouko had seen it, of course.

And then she'd kept quiet the whole time.

She'd waited the whole time, quietly, for Banri to say something.

"...I'm, sor..."

Banri was practically dumbfounded, his eyes opened wide, as he enumerated the things he had given to Kouko: betrayals, disappointments, lies, deceptions... He so wanted her to be happy, so wanted her to smile, that he could say anything.

But what in the world would she do? Would it be at all right to have confidence in him, in such a lowlife saying such things to her?

"...About, Linda, sempai,"

He squeezed it out of his throat.

As she listened to Banri's voice, Kouko didn't even move.

"Before I lost my memories, we were classmates. Of the same high school, in the same class, in the same running club, we were friends. ...I had completely forgotten her, and didn't know her at all, encountering her purely by chance. Linda, of course, recognized me at once, but she pretended for a long time not to, and played the part of senpai toward me."

His voice betrayed the state of his heart, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Nevertheless, he spoke. He couldn't help it.

"...Why?"

Kouko, her body not moving,

"Didn't you tell me...?"

She asked, as if whispering.

"...Because I didn't want you to know. Before I lost my memories, I loved Linda. I didn't want you to realize that."

Not turning on the lights, amidst the darkness, Kouko remained in a seated posture. Sitting cross-legged, she looked vacantly at Banri's face.

Her eyes blinked slowly.

"...That, in other words, is because... I am an annoying kind of woman...? Or at any rate because you thought I was noisy, fussy and bothersome...?"

"No. It was because I felt guilty."

He could no longer lie to this person.

He could not have secrets.

If there was anything he could offer her, it was honesty. Only that, Banri thought. Already, he had nothing but that left to give. And so, he kept on talking.

"There was a moment when my memories returned."

"...Eh...? Wha, what...?"

"Suddenly, like a flashback, there was nothing I could do about it. There was a moment like a storm, where my soul, my very life shouted out, crying 'I want to return to where Linda is.'"

"..."

Banri realized that for the first time, she was lost for words.

For several seconds Kouko was speechless, her body curved backwards as if she were taken aback, and then,

"...Why, did... you tell me about that...!?"

Crack, her head snapped forward like that of a doll whose head had been pulled backwards.

Her beautiful face all mussed up, tears flowed from beneath her eyelashes and down her cheeks. From lips twisted as if her teeth were clenched, they fell to the floor.

"But I wanted to become a good girlfriend...! Even when I saw the picture, I thought I should wait for you to say something to me! I already thought I should stop pushing you for an answer, and stop acting insecure! I thought I should try to calm myself down, see things in a good way and become less annoying! I really tried hard...! I did! I did my best! But, but, if you told me about it, wha, what should I do!? And look already, everything's no good, everything turned out bad, it's like this...! It's turned out like this! Now what am I going to do? I hate this, I hate it! I can't stand it anymore!"

Striking the floor with both her hands, Kouko's crying voice, gone hoarse, had become practically a shriek.

Even though Banri was quivering to be able to jump over and touch her shoulder, he could not. Not even though he was shaking violently up and down. Already, he could not even apologize.

"Wh, why!? Why'd you say it!? Hey, why, why!? Why, why did you tell me that!?"

"...I want to be,"

Unable to draw closer to her as things were, Banri could do no more than speak the truth.

"honest with you."

"I didn't want to know!"

She threw her words, like a scream, sharp and pointed.

He wondered what would come of this, of those last words.

He prepared for Kouko to stand up, for this to be their last time together. She would leave his room as things were, leave altogether and never return again. So he thought.

Instead, the standing Kouko fell to her knees as if she'd thrown herself down, bumping quite harshly, and clung to the still seated Banri's neck.

"Kaga, sa..."

Leaning her entire weight against the shocked Banri's body, she pressed her sobbing face against his neck.

Banri could not say anything to the heat of her cheeks, and closed both his eyes tightly.

Her tear moistened, trembling lips,

"Tada-kun, you are a storm... like a storm, you stir up my heart."

So murmuring, her tears falling once more, she heaved with sobs, but never once let go of him. The hands that encircled Banri's head held tightly to the back of his T-shirt.

He wondered whether it was okay to touch her slender body. In spite of his hesitation, Banri wrapped both his arms around Kouko's back. As if she were relieved, Kouko's crying voice, like that of a child's, became less shrill.

"Can you forgive me...?"

"I've already forgotten it."

Raising her tear-dampened face, Kouko gazed back at Banri's eyes. Letting a sigh escape from her half-opened lips,

"...Please. Forget about the past. I am good with that much. I only wish one thing from you,

only that. ...So... please..."

She was waiting for Banri's answer.

Kouko's wet eyes shook forlornly, blinking, sparkling like two stars in the evening sky.

Nodding, Banri,

"...I understand. I will do that."

He promised her.

On Kouko's crying face, her makeup running, at last, slowly, a soft smile spread out. Kouko's stars twinkled and gently whispered that she believed in such a man, somebody like Tada Banri.

---Even though she knew that it was not something he had any control over. Even though again, up to this point, he had been a man accumulating lies, and promises that he could not keep.

He held Kouko tightly, over his shoulder. Only Banri kept his eyes open in the dark. He could not see anything moving, anything living from there. Nobody else, nothing but the empty room was reflected in his eyes.

The day of their first encounter. Mitsuo had pointed at Kouko and called her "a disaster." And now, Banri thought.

As far as Kouko was concerned, he himself was a disaster. In truth, he was an outrageous trouble-maker. Bringing people troubles, causing them pain, he was plainly a spirit of misfortune.

Finding a woman, drawing closer to her, and then, like this, catching her and wounding her...

"...Tada-kun, from now on, may I call you 'Banri'?"

"Yes, that's okay."

"Tada-ku... Banri, could you call me 'Kouko'?"

"Yes, that's okay, ...Kouko."

"Banri"

"Kouko"

"I love you. ...How it turned out like this, I have no idea. But, I love you. I really do."

...How?

Somebody like me.

It was something he wanted to ask, but he kept his mouth shut. Asking it would have no meaning. However sweet the answer he might get from Kouko, there was no way he could believe it.

Because he more than anybody knew his own value, the harm his own existance was doing and the weight of his evil influence.

"...And I love you too. I'm truly sorry. ...Completely. Sorry. I am very sorry."

Hmph, smiling gently, Kouko moved her body away, holding on to Banri's hand.

She wrapped her own cheek with Banri's hand.

"...My face looks awful, doesn't it? Don't I look ugly?"

"No, you're fine. Look at me: I just realized I didn't clean off my makeup very well. It looks like the foundation smeared. There's a lot of color around my eyes."

"You're right. It's gotten dark under your eyes."

"Oh, me too? It's been itching strangely since a little while ago..."

Mwa.

He could just feel her kiss.

Kouko had had to lean forward in order to kiss him.

Her cheek still wrapped in Banri's hand, Kouko looked downwards. Eyes closed, she softly held her breath. And then, her eyes, hidden by her eyelashes, shook, and unable to look into Banri's eyes still,

"...When morning comes, couldn't we go buy some makeup remover? I'm thinking, maybe... it's something we can do... while I'm staying here in this room..."

That's what she's thinking.

She is saying she wants to be here until the morning.

By staying here in my room, she's saying she wants us to have a relationship from now on.

"...Kaga-sa... Kouko"

Without stirring, she waited. Her long eyelashes, the mascara melted by her tears, trembled at Banri's movement.

Banri, almost by reflex, pulled his hand away from the soft feeling wrapped about its back.

As if in shock, Kouko's eyes opened wide,

(Look, Tada Banri. Your hands...)

Banri could not look at the back of his hand, nor even breathe.

(Just from hiding what you've done in hurting Kaga Kouko, your hands must be filthy.)

...Oh, that's right.

"...Banri..."

Her voice choking up, Kouko once more clasped Banri's hand tightly. She entwined her fingers with his, squeezing them hard.

"Hey, I've been worried. ...Do you understand? Will you, understand me?"

Raising her face and looking into Banri's eyes, her voice shook once more as if she were crying.

"No matter what, I worry... there is nothing else but you and me. The time we have together is not enough. What we experience doesn't suffice. Not the memories. ...Not even the pictures."

Once, she took his fingers back and held them tight, but Banri softly separated her hands from his.

Doing so, he gently returned Kouko's hands to her lap, overlapping each other. As if it were clearly and easily understood that he did not wish to touch her more than this, he pulled back just a little from her.

With a sad looking face, like an abandoned child, Kouko stared at Banri in blank amazement,

"In that case, let's go take a picture. Now. Right away, even. Any time. A picture of you and me; I want that. Let's start over from there, the two of us."

Banri smiled at her. He intended to vow to her that he would put all he had into it.

He, Tada Banri, would never hurt Kaga Kouko again. For that reason, he would move on, shredding all of his doubts and past with these hands.

Past, present, future, everything for the sake of Kaga Kouko's happiness rather than his own.

"So there's no need to hurry. Because I've disappointed you, I don't want to push you unreasonably."

In a little bit, Kouko nodded.

On the other side of the curtains a pale blue light was showing. It must be dawn, thought Banri.

This night was ended and once more morning was arriving.

* * *

While waiting for Linda in the early afternoon by the station's ticket gate, Banri looked at a picture.

You could say it was certain proof that his high-school self and Linda had lived at the same moment.

With his thumb, he gently traced his own smile. The laughing Linda next to him, this time, was loved to death. ...That, by me.

I feel sure. That was me, he said to himself.

Gently putting the photo away in his bag's pocket, he raised his healed face and,

"Tada Banri!"

It was Linda herself, running up the steps and waving towards him. Indeed, dressed like back home in a simple T-shirt and cargo pants, her sandals clacking,

"You waited? I mean... I mean... really! Sorry! Sorry about that!"

As she approached, out of breath, she brought both hands together in front of her where he could see them. And then,

"I was drunk last night, really! What am I going to do already... I got Kouko-chan mad, and I can't blame her... really, I'm seriously... the worst..."

Still looking down as hard as she could, she hung her head as if heartbroken. Shaking his head as he stepped towards her, the flustered Banri,

"No! Please don't worry like that! Kouko's already okay!"

Playing around, he gave her the thumbs up. But Linda neither saw it nor smiled for him.

"If she's okay, then why this talk...?"

"Well, umm, well... lots of stuff."

This morning he'd sent a message to Linda: "About yesterday, there are a few things I'd like to

talk about, so would it be all right if I met you at your place?" And then Banri, by himself, had gone to the town where Linda lived.

Transfering at the first station, he took the first train. And then, he went inside the first station. He was meeting Linda in a place he wasn't familiar with, with only one lonely little shop there.

All he'd said to Kouko was that Linda-senpai was going to talk with him. So he'd asked, "Would you return the photo to me?" All he asked of her was the photo she had brought with her. Right now she was in Banri's room, waiting for Banri to return.

"For now, why don't we go into a store?"

"There aren't any stores around here. ...It can't be helped, shall we walk?"

Linda turned towards the sign for the north entrance. She went down the stairs and Banri followed behind. Descending from the raised structure and exiting the turnstiles, he got his first view of the town.

The small station was alongside a private rail line.

Thinking back on when he was in the train, it was very much the countryside. It was really hard for him to believe that this, too, was Tokyo. Banri wondered if it was because it was much further from the city center than where he lived, with the ‘hustle and bustle' of an impersonal residential area, but then there was that faintly manure smell that hung in the air. Perhaps he was close to some farm fields. Banri found it surprising, but he missed that a little. Even by himself like this, it felt like something he missed: Shimada Town and home, the smell of tea plantations stretching all the way to the forests on the mountain slopes, faintly mixed with that of gasoline and machine oil, just like back home.

While they looked around restlessly, they came out from under the eaves of the station. Suddenly and spontaneously they both shouted out loud. The intense, violent sunlight of full summer rushed down over their entire bodies like a flame.

Without tall buildings, the sky was broad, and right in front of the station was a row of single houses. They certainly didn't seem adequate to be stores.

Banri followed behind Linda as they walked down a sidewalk. A row of unusually wide-spaced and large trees went along the road as far as he could see. As if picking a path under the shadow of the broad and thick trees, they finally came out by the riverside.

Undergrowth hiding its banks, the river flowed full.

The water smelled of summer, with a slight fishy aroma.

At the riverbank in the middle of the day, there were the shapes of people scattered here and there. People walking their dogs. People taking their kids for a walk. There were people jogging,

and old people deep in conversation. Every last one of them was wearing a hat or carrying an umbrella, protecting themselves from the July sunlight.

Linda too, wearing a raw cotton hat,

"...Well then. Shall we hear your story? What's going on? Did anything happen?"

She turned towards Banri.

On pavement so hot you'd be burnt if you touched it, there were two sharp black shadows.

He wondered if what they planted there on the wide riverbank was cherry trees. A strong wind raised a great rustling noise, sliding over the water's surface and through the thick branches and leaves.

As if they were scared, or stirred up with a strange anxiety, the creaking of the branches and trunks reached even to Banri's ears.

"It's like the old days."

Linda's brown eyes were dazzling, but seemed to be narrowed.

"...You said that in the old days, we weren't dating each other."

"Yes, that's right."

"I loved you. But, senpai, ...Linda, you didn't love me. That's what it looks like."

Linda held down her hat with one hand to ensure it wouldn't fly away, but she quite clearly nodded.

"That's right. In the emotional sense, so it seems. You were a friend, but there wasn't love. I, did not, love you."

He pulled the photo out from the pocket of his bag.

Speaking inside himself, Banri asked 'Did you hear that right?' to his smiling self in the picture. 'That's what I wanted you to hear clearly.'

However strongly you feel about it, however much you want to go back, there's no turning back.

Linda said she "doesn't like" you.

So give it up already.

Do me the favor of dying.

Disappear.

"*...ngh*"

He tried to tear apart the photo in one go, but no matter what he did, his fingers didn't have the strength. He grasped it in both hands like an idiot, took several deep breaths, and yet those hands wouldn't move for him.

In front of Linda, Banri hung his head, powerless.

...I'm asking you, so disappear for me. No way, no way, no way. Somehow, I'm begging you. No way, no way, no way. Please cease to exist. No way. Make the pain in my heart go away.

(No way!)

I love Linda.

He wanted to be by Linda's side. He wanted to be laughing with her always. He would be glad to be with Linda only. Without Linda there, he didn't want to do anything. Living without joy, without happiness, nor anything else, Banri simply continued searching for Linda. Always. Truly, always, a long time. However far away they were separated. Even if his voice could no longer reach her. He was always searching for her. He wanted to go back. He wanted to find her.

But, he couldn't help that they were only one-sided feelings.

Then he even hurt Kaga Kouko.

The strength fled from his shaking hands. The picture slipped from them, the wind on the verge of carrying it away, when Linda's white fingers grabbed it in mid-air.

"...Tada, Banri... you, are you okay?"

"...I owe you a lot for all you have done. Thank you very much for up to now."

Desperately, Banri looked up.

Having lost the photo, his two hands were not yet motionless, shaking but steadying up. Even so, he thought he should be able to smile.

But there was nothing to be seen. There was nothing to be heard. Neither did his head have what he should say.

"From now on, say that in the past we were acquaintances, that we never had a relationship. Of course, if this or that is said, it will be from stress. I don't want us talking about my amnesia. After all, those are things I can't even remember. And so, thank you for the attention you have paid to me. I would like to say farewell to my past. I want to make it entirely not there. And so,"

'No way, no way!' screamed his emotions, as if they were coiling about him.

As the words exploded in his thoughts, Banri tore at them. So tossing them away, he was determined not to look back again.

"So, from now on we are simply senpai and kouhai over in the club. No don't need to pay any attention to me at all. As for me, of course, after all, will not think any different."

Standing up like this, continuing to flap his jaws, was the best he could do.

He could not look at Linda's expression. He could not think about his emotions. Banri was doing nothing less than tearing off and throwing away part of his heart.

It's bleeding, he thought.

It was his own flesh, certainly.

The remnants of his feelings towards Linda that were brought back to life that night, they really were of the substance that formed the human called Tada Banri. It was clearly part of himself. It was flesh.

Naturally, it was torn, and hurt. Not uttering his pain, Banri thought of Kouko. The face of the lover which he must not hurt.

Before his eyes, the face of the person he loved before.

Though he had been rude, he should not have hurt her. Clinging to such thoughts, Banri continued to move his mouth in a daze.

...But, Linda did not love him. And because of that,

"I mean, the truth, frankly, is that Kouko is a little concerned about you. I want to take proper care of her, and set a clear distance between us. I'm sorry an idiotic remark I made has turned into such an incredible misunderstanding..."

While the blood that nobody could see gushed from his heart, Banri laughed for show. The wound on his still unhealed lip hurt.

"...It's all right."

Linda,

"It's okay. I understand."

Holding the photo one-handed in the wind, holding down her hat with that hand, under the mid-summer brightness, she listened to Banri's words.

Hidden by the hat's visor, her eyes could not be seen.

Only her lips, smiling.

"I understand perfectly. And so, yes. You're right. I think you need not worry about Kouko-chan worrying, nor I. And I think that's the way it should be."

And then,

"...Ah...!"

Banri's was the voice that rose.

Forcefully, Linda ripped the photo in her hand in half.

And then in half again, and again.

More and more torn, into smaller and smaller pieces, the pieces of the photo began to flutter, dancing up from Linda's hand. And just like that, they were scattered in the wind.

The pieces disappeared just like that, flying somewhere far away. It was already impossible to recover them. Never again.

"It is better this way, Banri."

* * *

Startling him, those lips moved,

"I'm always backwards, Banri."

Still unable to even hand her the umbrella, he listened to Linda's voice.

She was probably cold, thoroughly chilled. That voice was shaking horribly.

The mid-winter's night raindrops wetting Linda's coat were half frozen, sparkling on the green cloth.

While he'd finished his duties as "Last Act", Linda had been freezing like this, waiting the whole time under the eaves by the door.

And then, now, she was squeezing the words out.

"...I don't fully understand why, but every now and then I am incredible idiot. Why is it that what I think and what I say are two different things entirely? ...I do it without thinking, headlong."

Those white cheeks,

"...Please forgive my idiot self."

Just like tears, the freezing rain drops followed them, falling.

When he saw that, it was at that moment.

His feet stepped out of their own volition, nothing to do with his own will. They broke into a run. Even though he had decided he should never forgive her, nor talk to her ever again, his body moved on its own. And then these hands,

"...I cannot forgive you. I will never, never like somebody like Linda."

He held out the umbrella over Linda.

Only the words that left his mouth were in accord with his intentions, but they were already a worthless structure even to himself, and probably even Linda knew that.

"I'm sorry. Really, I'm sorry, Banri...!"

Looking up at him from under the umbrella, Linda murmured with a desperate expression. Her mouth open as if gasping, she shivered, looking pale.

It was at that moment that the flames were kindled.

A fire caught within his heart.

"...Jeez. What kind of face are you making!?"

"Agh!"

Joking as usual, he gave Linda a soft punch in the side. Acting as if they were going back to messing around, he said, "Enough! Let's go home!"

She doesn't love me.

If those words were a hasty reaction, then Linda, to me...

Jeez, he thought, shaking his head from side to side as he walked. There's no way. You can't take it that far. Even he knew the difference in nuance between "It's not that I don't like you" and "I like you".

But, there just might be, a little bit there.

...He might have a hope, a possibility, or something like it.

We might, after this, may one way or another come to be. With Linda by my side, under a single umbrella, looking down at her face, bearing the heat of the fire in his heart.

In that way, Linda and I had escaped the danger of their friendship breaking, and had managed make peace with each other.

As for me, I was horribly regretting that space of ten days.

If you knew perfectly when your days would end, if you knew the limit of your time, then you wouldn't do such stubborn things. Even though one's time is limited, and though his own was getting smaller and smaller, he had completely wasted ten precious days.

Tada Banri is walking by himself.

I follow behind, silent.

I want to tell him, 'Look back at the shape of this me.' I know that this voice will not reach him when I try to speak anyhow. Even so, I want to tell him.

Look.

I'm covered with blood.

And then look back at yourself.

You're blood-stained too.

You're picking at your wounds with all your might, that's what you're doing. If you don't want to notice your wounds, then you should simply leave them alone. Just walk forward, not looking behind you, not seeing my standing self.

In the end, the day will come when you remember.

That day, of the time when it was lifted up from the riverbed, blood-stained, your own body. You lost everything, everything but a body wounded all over.

Me, ...we.

Then, and now too, you will see just how blood-stained you are.

* * *

"...You're posing again! I told you not to do it, it doesn't look natural!"

Banri burst into laughter spontaneously, and lowered the camera he'd gotten ready. His hands were shaking from the laughter, and in any case he wasn't the best at taking pictures.

"What? I wasn't posing, was I?"

"Yes you were!"

"I was not."

That said, once he'd gotten the camera ready, Kouko, of course, had one hand on her hip. And her legs crossed, her head tilted to one side, smiling for the camera. She had clearly decided to show herself too perfectly, like a model. Finding it funny, Banri, of course, had burst into laughter. Kouko seemed to be caught too, saying "What the...?" as she also broke into laughter.

In things like this, for quite a while now, even forever, it was as if Kouko didn't really want him to snap anything that felt natural, or indeed everyday.

The two of them were in Banri's apartment.

Kouko had brought the digital camera.

"I mean, it's because I know you're trying to make me, just me, the subject of the photos."

Kouko, who had been over by the wall, stepped over towards Banri, grabbed him by the arm, reached out to the hand that held the camera and pointed the lens towards the two of them. Setting their cheeks together,

"I want to take one of the two of us together. Look, ...there, smile!"

"...Uh..."

Because he wasn't used to it, he couldn't take a good self-portrait. Banri had gotten all nervous, gone shy, and in the end had laughed awkwardly.

Ready once more, the flash went off. Perhaps two smiling faces were finally captured.

Trying to be sure she was happy, nudging Kouko a little on the back, Banri,

"Hey, Kouko, why don't we take some outside? It looks hot, but the weather's nice."

He pointed out the window.

A summer's afternoon.

In the white sunlight there were lines of tree leaves, sparkling vividly. They brightened this moment, this now, with all their might.

I want to be in that scenery, laughing with Kouko, thought Banri.

"Yes!"

Laughing, nodding like a child, Kouko headed for the door without even getting her bag. In the entrance, their shoes had been carelessly left behind, not having been set in order.

Amongst the scattered shoes, there was even a pair of flourescent yellow Nikes.

Scattered left and right facing the entrance, even now looking ready to fly out the door, they seemed like they wanted to go running.

Stepping carefully over all that, he stuffed his feet into his sandals.

"Banriii! Hurryyy!" He could hear the voice calling him by name.

The End

Postscript

By the time you receive this book into your hands, I will have turned 34 years old. Born on the 24th day of February, a Pisces with blood type O, Takemiya at your service. Oh no, oh no, half my thirties are gone... nooo, what am I going to do? Since my debut I've come to owe so much to my managers, days of "We've sure gotten incredibly old, haven't you noticed?..." "Haven't you noticed?...", bickering roughly with serious faces. But it cannot be recovered, the first half of our thirties. If I'd been a little less prepared, then, ah, ah, ...what the!? I just can't pronounce that word! Ah, aro, aroun...

Around forty.

(Eeee!)

Of, the world. ...It's sc sc sc scary, isn't it? Don't sh sh sh shiver! ...Don't...!

...If I were to notice this and that, I am 34, and "Golden Time" is already up to four volumes. You have stuck with me up to now, and this time too you've received it in your hands, I truly thank you very much. Have you been enjoying yourselves in receiving it? Already, rea.....lly! My...gosh! I would think that real college students reading this book would be astonished at college students who go out without hardly studying. Please, I would be happy if you would forgive me grinning and saying, here and there, "Being 34 is stupid!"

Well, recently, simply because I didn't want to face my approaching forty years of age, I have been falling for the temptations in front of me. I may even be becoming a shopaholic. What am I buying? Latex. From my love of latex, I am buying as if I were crazy about nothing but latex.

As it is, a woman past her prime, for the most part, after washing her face will apply face lotion, then beauty cream, then latex, and if she's still worried about dryness, she'll apply cream again, as if stepping through her "face procedure". As for myself, I really don't care about face creams and beauty lotions, but since I realize I cannot do without putting something on, I splash on what I think I have to. But.

Latex.

I really love the stuff. The reason is simple: it feels good when I apply it to my face. Nowadays every brand, the slippery expensive stuff, the stuff that refreshes you, the good smelling stuff, the smelly stuff (no good, that), the stuff that helps your skin, the stuff that irritates your skin (no good either), there really are so many kinds out there, that against my better judgment I've gotten to where I try them here, there, one after another. Moreover, satisfied with only trying it on my face, I had unthinkingly gone and applied it to my body. After I'd done such a thing, having put on so much... I cannot, instinctively I thought, WHAT A WASTE!

That's it in a nutshell. Take for example a hot day in mid-summer. Sweating profusely as I enter a coffee shop, a cool face towel is presented to me. I wipe my hands with it. Phew, I take a breather. ...You ask, can it be stopped at that? Can it not be stopped? Wouldn't you unintentionally do your face too? It's that feeling. Saying to yourself, "Enough already, I can reach all of me~..." "Ah~... yummy~..." Latex has corrupted my entire body.

Though of course there are bodily uses for latex, so to speak, in this world and theoretically, if you were to apply it to yourself, you should see good results, but of course that is something a little different. For, forbidden! Feelings like that are unworthy. Aah! That's for my face, brother! My feet! My ankles! All over! ...that kind of feeling, I want to have fun with latex. Is it the feeling of "That person was saying what?" It's OK. Despite people giving me faces like that, I'm getting used to it, really.

Though I like it anywhere on my body, my supply is steadily diminishing. Worried that it might disappear, I've been buying up latex like crazy, a festival that for now, I cannot see the end of. When I go to department and drug stores, unconsciously my eyes have been searching for latex. Anywhere with latex would be good! All you latex-crazed people in the nation, if you have recommendations for latex, by all means let me know, please. Though we have latex here, is there not anywhere else?

And so. Once more, you've stuck with me to the end of this postscript. Truly, I thank you very much! Even more, I humbly thank you that you have received this book into your hands. The next volume, by all means, please be nice to it! Master Komatsu Eeji, and our manager Yuasa-sama, are also indebted to you. Please wait for me as I walk towards the world of my forties.

竹宮ゆゆこ
Takemiya Yuyuko

Translator's Notes

Stand-offish

↕There is a little play on words going on here in Japanese. The first word, 水臭い (mizukusai) means 'stand-offish, reserved.' The second word, ヤニ臭い (yanikusai) means 'reeking of tobacco.'